魔法科高校の劣等生11

来訪者編〈下〉

The irregular at magic high school

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato
illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida

電撃文庫

魔法科高校の劣等生⑪
来訪者編<下>

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しかし『パラサイト』本体は『宿主』から抜け出しこの世界を漂い続け、そして次の宿主を見つけ出した。

ヒューマノイド型ホームヘルパーロボット。

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『最強の魔法師』と別次元からの『来訪者』を巡る激突は、魔法科高校を舞台に最終決戦を迎える！

さ-14-11

魔法科高校の劣等生⑪
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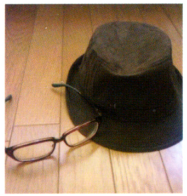
佐島勤

電撃文庫



佐島勤

西暦19XX年、日本の片田舎に生まれる。和洋のスペースオペラを糧に少年時代を過ごす。青年時代、ファンタジーと伝奇小説に転向。卒業後、企業戦士（ただし雑兵）として現実世界に魂を売り渡すも、西暦2011年、遅れてきたジュブナイル作家として空想世界に帰還を果たす。（本プロフィールには虚偽と誇張表現が含まれています）

【電撃文庫作品】

魔法科高校の劣等生①② 入学編<上><下>
魔法科高校の劣等生③④ 九校戦編<上><下>
魔法科高校の劣等生⑤ 夏休み編+1
魔法科高校の劣等生⑥⑦ 横浜騒乱編<上><下>
魔法科高校の劣等生⑧ 追憶編
魔法科高校の劣等生⑨⑩⑪ 来訪者編<上><中><下>

イラスト：石田可奈

西暦19XX年生まれ。挿絵は初仕事。本業はアニメーター。『俺の妹。』の総作画監督を担当。

SpecialThanks：ジミーストーンさん。

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Tsutomu Sato presents
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紀伊國屋書店×電撃文庫

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佐島勤

Tsutomu Sato

illustration／石田可奈

Kana Ishida

illustrator assistant／シミー・ストーン、末永康子

design／BEE-PEE

マルテ
Malte

異次元からやってきた『吸血鬼（パラサイト）』。本体は精神に由来する情報体で、宿主の持つ生物としての根源的な欲求……つまり種族保存の本能に基づき行動している。

司波達也
しば・たつや

司波兄妹の兄。国立魔法大学付属第一高校一年E組所属。学内では『雑草（ウィード）』と揶揄される二科生徒だが、それは実技試験がとある理由で低く評価されてしまうためである。

ピクシー
Pixie

魔法科高校が所有するホームヘルパーのロボット。その機械の身体に、現在は光井ほのかの情想パターンをコピーした『パラサイト』が宿っている。

司波深雪
しば・みゆき

司波兄妹の妹。1年A組所属。魔法科高校に主席で入学したエリート。『花冠（ブルーム）』と呼ばれる一科生徒で、得意分野は『冷却魔法』。唯一の愛すべき欠点は『重度のブラコン』。

「リーナ、下がれ！」
「お兄様！」
「余計なお世話よ！」
アンジェリーナ＝クドウ＝シールズ
Angelina=Kudou=Shields
アメリカから『交換留学』で魔法科高校にやってきた高校生。類い希なる魔法技術を持つ、金髪碧眼の美少女。その正体は、米軍最強の魔法師アンジー・シリウス少佐。

『吸血鬼（パラサイト）』とは――？

●発生源

パラサイトたちは、精神に由来する情報生命体と目されている。もともとは異次元で形成されたエネルギー情報体で、北アメリカ合衆国テキサス州ダラス郊外で行われたマイクロブラックホール生成・蒸発実験によって次元の壁が揺らぎ、この世界に侵入した、と考えられている。

●ネーミングの由来

事件発生時、犠牲者に目立った外傷が無いにも拘わらず、体内から大量の血液が失われていたことから。これは、パラサイトたちが伝奇小説に登場する『吸血鬼』のように血を吸うためではなく、自身の増殖に失敗した副作用に依るもの。

●増殖のプロセス

宿主となる可能性を認めた人体に自分の一部を切り離し送り込む。分離体は血液中の想子と霊子を吸収しながら血管に沿って広がり、自分自身と血液を置き換えることで肉体に浸透していく。それが完了すれば、その情報体である幽体も掌握できる……はずだったが、現状までに成功例はない。

●目 的

パラサイトたちに指揮官に該当するものは存在せず、個別の思考能力を持ちながら、意識を共有している。パラサイト同士で交信を行い、ある程度の範囲における仲間の居場所特定も可能。生命体を宿主とした場合、その最も根源的な欲求に影響を受ける。つまり、「生き延び、仲間を殖やす」という本能に基づき、行動していた。

●総 数

こちらの世界にやって来たパラサイトの数は、総計で１２体と推測されている。個体増減は以下の通りである。
ＵＳＮＡ本国でリーナが３体を処分（処分とは言っても、宿主を処分しただけで、パラサイト自体は精神体として抜け出したに過ぎない）。サリバン、ミアを含む残り９体が日本に逃亡した。別件調査のために日本にやってきていたリーナがパラサイトであるサリバンを処分、さらに魔法科高校内でミアが自爆する。続いて黒羽貢とその配下が残り７体全てを処分した。一方、ＵＳＮＡ国内では処分した３体が宿主を見つけ復活し、日本に来日する。日本で処分された９体の蘇生を試みて、ピクシー以外の８体を蘇生させた。その後、達也たちとの交戦で３体のパラサイトを封印することに成功。残り８体となるも、宿主３体ごと防諜第三課に奪われ、そこで再びパラサイト３体は復活した。現状、残り１１体。

Chapter 13

"—Hey, don't you think it's terrible? I was publicly humiliated, publicly humiliated."

The agitation in the shrill girlish voice was obvious and the response to it was,

[…That's the fourth time, already.][1]

This voice that was also girlish was truly sleepy.

The difference between the mental conditions of the pair having this telephone conversation was like the difference in temperature between mid winter and mid summer.

However, that might be inevitable. Only Honoka had reason to be agitated and Shizuku had a reason to plead to be allowed to sleep.

Honoka was agitated for a reason. Her heart's secret longings had been exposed. Not just the likes and loves that resided in her could be called forfeit, even to herself that thought felt like it might be a little too serious for this era. Although the yearnings she herself couldn't voice being spoken from another's mouth was humiliating enough, Honoka had been exposed not just in front of the one she was thinking about but to many other people as well, so her feeling of such self-conscious torment was inevitable. The fact that the one who spoke her own feelings for her was not a human, but a maid droid possessed by a parasite did not comfort Honoka at all.

"That doesn't matter, because I have been so humiliated."

Honoka demanded that her friend comfort her in a sullen voice. The sight of Honoka's pouty profile made the Shizuku in the middle of the screen sigh lightly.

[I understand that so please understand my position. What time do you think it is right now?]

On the other hand, Shizuku had good reason to make the demand 'I want to sleep'. It was simply the time, no actually it was the time difference. To emphasize Shizuku's remark, a clock with three hands filled the display. The classic Arabesque design short hand was pointing between IV and V. Tokyo and Berkeley (California) have a seven hour time difference. If it was nine thirty pm in Tokyo then it was four thirty am in Berkeley.

[Please can't this wait at least two hours?]

It could be said that it was perfectly natural for Shizuku to ardently grumble. Even now, the eyelids on both eyes looked just about to close. Naturally, Honoka's face turned apologetic and her shoulders hunched.

"I did wait for an hour already but…"

When she heard the excuse, Shizuku's sleepy eyes twinkled and this time she sighed her acceptance.

[That trait of yours has changed very little over the years……]

"I'm always, always troubling you……"

[You're not a bother…..as long as you pay attention to the time.]

"Uh…..I'm sorry."

Gazing across the screen at Honoka who had no more excuses, Shizuku sighed one more time. This time she probably shook off her sleepiness with the sigh, as while her eyes were no more than half open, her face was pretty steady.

[However, something good might come out of this.]

The voice lacked much inflection — as usual and her pronunciation had become distinct.

"What? What? There's nothing good about this!"

As she thrust away Shizuku's words of comfort, Honoka forgot how dejected she had been until now and vehemently chewed out Shizuku.

[But, you weren't able to speak those words yourself, right?]

However, Shizuku wasn't just carelessly using the word 'good'. Maybe because of her tone or perhaps due to the way she put it into words, Honoka's protests were taken out with a single shot.

[Will you acknowledge that you have dependent tendencies?]

"Such tendencies…"

Honoka reflexively tried to deny it, but perhaps she didn't think she could deny it even to herself. Her words of rebuttal faded out part way thru and

she averted her eyes from Shizuku's eyes which were peering at her intently through the screen — to be exact, her eyes were only partly open.

[Honoka, how many years do you think we've been hanging out together.]

Shizuku delivered one last shot to make sure in a gently instructive tone.

"…But, I can't help it."

Honoka acknowledged Shizuku's point with a voice that was both defiant and resigned.

"I am descended from 'Elements' after all."

Is even personality influenced by genetics? Shizuku thought with her usual doubt, however, even if she debated it, it would be meaningless. Besides, she understood debate wasn't really necessary.

[Wanting to rely on someone is neither good or bad. Not everyone is a leader that takes the initiative without relying on someone and I think they function in the world quite well.]

When her friend's words did not berate her, Honoka's gaze still showed indecision, but it had returned to normal.

[What I want to say is Tatsuya-san is a rather good person for Honoka to rely upon.]

Their eyes met through the camera, Shizuku speaking as if she was carefully giving detailed instructions.

"You think…so?"

Shizuku nodded without a qualm of hesitation to Honoka's tremulous question.

[I believe Tatsuya basically does not only do part of what someone wants. Instead, he is a person who precisely answers someone's desires.]

"You mean if I do not speak clearly, he won't understand me?"

[That's right. Besides he is certainly ingenuous.]

"Um, by that…?"

The answer Shizuku made to Honoka's oh so timid question was,

[Even if he does do what you say, he won't force you to do anything sexual, is what I mean.]

Such directness — could be criticized as lewdness.

Honoka's face became red in the twinkling of an eye.

Still beneath the red face, a glimpse of a little regret could be seen.

[Honoka, maybe you want to be a little more forceful in how you approach him.]

"Shizuku!"

Honoka raised her voice and glared at the screen. However, in there was only a look on Shizuku's face that said 'But, it's the truth'.

"Enough!"

Even though she turned her face away with a sulky look,

"……"

"……Shizuku."

As expected the one who gave in and spoke first was Honoka.

"What should I do?"

[The only thing you can do is keep moving forward.]

Shizuku did not have a wealth of romantic experiences. Rather her experiences could be called meager compared to other teenage girls around the same age in their country in this era. Even so, she dared to give her friend who was trapped in a maze caused by thinking too much a kick in the posterior with simple assertions.

"Even now, I intend on doing all I can to keep moving forward but…"

[Just intending is futile. Your rival is too strong.]

"By rival…?"

[Victory over Miyuki will be difficult.]

"Miyuki? But Miyuki and Tatsuya-san are—"

[Siblings. So?]

Shizuku dismissed Honoka's common sense rebuttal with one word. That simple 'so' was packed with the nuance of 'I know that. What does that matter'.

"But, that, that is…"

With a shocked look, Honoka shook her head at the camera. However, to the eyes of Shizuku who had been friends with Honoka for a long time, she did not look like she had actually received a shock.

[Honoka, there's no way you are going after Tatsuya-san just because you want to have sex with him.]

"O-Of course not! Well, there's no way that I am completely uninterested in that but…"

Shizuku from her side of the screen was looking at Honoka who had started fidgeting with eyes that said 'what is this person saying'. However, if she remained silent, Shizuku was the one who was going to feel uncomfortable. Shizuku forcibly cut off this part of the conversation.

[Blood ties only interfere with things like that. If you're satisfied with just being with someone, blood connections wouldn't be an obstacle. I would like to ask Miyuki something.]

"…What?"

She asked that question with a look…..that said she did not want to ask, but she couldn't not ask.

[How she thinks about Tatsuya.]

"…And?"

[Does she love him.]

"Uh….of course…."

Her face was pale, but she did not want to shriek, so instead she murmured it with a sigh.

[I did not mean fondness, I meant love.]

"…Oh?"

[I meant the feelings a girl has for a boy. Not simply as 'his little sister'.]

"?"

Nevertheless, the supplementary information Shizuku provided put her in a quandary on how to interpret her words.

[However….]

"However?"

When Shizuku hesitated, Honoka pressed her to continue by repeating her words back to her in a different tone of voice.

[I think even if she officially won't admit it even to herself that Miyuki does indeed like Tatsuya-san as a girl likes a boy.]

She continued her statement with a decisive supposition that showed no hesitation.

"Shizuku also thinks…."

Although Shizuku's logic ran a little(?) counter to worldly common sense, Honoka wasn't raising objections.

[Yes, therefore, I think you should take her on before she admits it to herself.]

"What do you mean?"

Honoka was not feigning innocence when she asked the question.

[Before Miyuki becomes serious, Honoka-san should become Tatsuya-san's number one.]

However, some words formed images, and the words 'Miyuki become serious' had such a strong future potential that the image filled Honoka's mind.

"Such a thing, is impossible…"

[At this time, it's wrong to give up. This was a disaster but I think you can use it to attract him.]

Shizuku delicately instilled the will to win into the whispering hunched over Honoka — she herself was fired up to do this — by giving her encouragement.

"Attract Tatsuya?"

[Yes. Somehow you have to convey all your feelings to him.]

"Won't I be annoying……"

[It'll be alright. Tatsuya certainly won't feel that you're a burden]

However, those words were not merely for reassurance. It was a strange thing to have faith in but Shizuku earnestly believed it was true.

◊ ◊ ◊

About the same time when Shizuku was lighting a fire under Honoka.

Tatsuya was confronting Lina who had transformed into 'Angie Sirius'.

Fire-like hair and gold colored eyes. Her entire appearance changed down to her facial features and height. No matter how much you looked at her, she didn't look like the same person as Lina. Even without the concealing mask, there was probably no one who didn't already know who would connect 'Angie Sirius' and 'Angelina Shields'. Not as long as they thought the mask was meant to conceal her identity by concealing her face.

Tatsuya carefully examined her form. There was no way he had spent this past half of a month playing around. He had practiced against Yakumo's 'Matoi'[2] making a pile of countermeasures to the information altering magic 'Parade'.

Perhaps it was a result of that training. The effect of Lina's 'Parade' now stopped at outward appearance, and he understood the coordinate information was not going to be rewritten. With this resistance, even if the coordinates were falsified, Tatsuya thought he could keep her in his CAD's sight.

Naturally, he couldn't be optimistic. This only affected Lina's appearance, this was not the time to take things easy or be careless. Rather, there was probably no room for error. Undoubtedly, he couldn't guarantee that he had

the necessary magic power to keep the coordinate information from being rewritten.

(In short, the magic took that much of his capacity.)

The USNA army's most elite magician battalion, 'Stars' gave the code name 'Sirius' to their head. Namely, the magician who possessed the strongest magic power. This girl must have all the resources for that magic that powerful concentrated in her.

The glittering striations of the attack on Tatsuya and Chiba Naotsugu had cleaved the darkness of the night. That attack was probably in fact a high energy plasma beam. If it was then the name of the magic she had performed was—

(Probably, without a doubt. That was 'Heavy Metal Burst'.)

The strategic magic of Angie Sirius of the Thirteen Apostles was 'Heavy Metal Burst'.

She transformed heavy metals into high energy plasma; the magic disseminated amplified solar ions over a wide area by the use of creating gas and electromagnetic repulsive force and increased high pressure.

Incidentally, there were more than a few users of magic that changed materials into plasma other than 'Angelina Sirius'. However, by only ionizing atoms, the complete body of the plasma that sprung forth would not produce the neutralizing electric repulsive force. Angelina Sirius was the only one who used 'Heavy Metal Burst' with that speed and scale, because only she could actually do the process that emitted the atoms to form the cloud and maintain the manufacture of plasma.

Nevertheless, 'Heavy Metal Burst' was supposed to be a magic that expelled high energy plasma in all directions from ground zero. Despite that, the plasma that attacked Chiba Naotsugu was a beam with directionality.

(It's not just being condensed. The effective range…..the scope of the dissemination is also being controlled.)

Plasma had strayed away from Naotsugu yet none of the buildings in the street around him had been destroyed because the plasma hadn't reached them. Maybe it was accompanied by a magic sequence that made it lose

plasma energy after it passed its target, or maybe she established a power point that would serve as a plug to stop the beam at a terminus.

How was she able to do that? He couldn't tell from only seeing it one time, but perhaps—

(Is it that 'staff'?)

He had never seen that staff before in Lina's hands, so that was a good possibility. Maybe but no, undeniably that was a USNA developed casting assistant device. If he wasn't in this spot, he would probably be praising the excellence of this technique.

(Nevertheless, right now this has the highest threat potential.)

He hadn't attained comprehension of the plasma stream control system but it wasn't as if he hadn't understood anything. If he 'observed' it one more time then he would be able to make a counter-measure. Was he being optimistic about observation? Tatsuya immediately repudiated that speculation himself. Tentativeness at this time would do him no good.

Instead, it would become a problem.

(If he took a direct blow, would he have enough reserve power remaining to counterattack?)

Against significant physical attacks, Tatsuya possessed revival ability that he did not control, but all he could do was 'revive', he could not 'block'.

The lack of control depended on the level of injury, not the frequency of use.

The beam just now was as fast as the speed of light. Which was far faster than the speed of sound which is why lightning is seen before thunder is heard. The speed of light is probably about a hundred times the speed of sound.

However in the present interval, the distance of sixty meters was spanned in less than two milliseconds. Which is the same as being instantaneous. It looked like evading it was impossible.

Nevertheless……..

(With the actual body moving at such speed, even if the gas was very diluted, a strong shockwave should occur. Since that was not happening, it

meant she had to have prepared some kind of tool beforehand to keep that from happening.)

If he could sense the creation of the 'path' then his body could avoid the targeting sights.

Tatsuya fully mobilized his senses and scowled at Lina.

In the darkness broken by the street lights, Lina just averted her eyes from Tatsuya's field of vision, abruptly turned back, made another quick turn back and smiled weakly.

She was clearly inviting him.

Tatsuya was puzzled.

Without a doubt it was a trap, but if it was a trap then Tatsuya was already in its jaws.

Even if he did not take her invitation, he did not think she would let him return safely.

If he couldn't even evade his adversary's aim then a gunfight at this location was out of the question.

Before the gaze of Tatsuya who was still deciding what he should do, Lina's feet lightly kicked off the road's surface.

That broke through his indecision.

While she ran or rather leaped, the deep red hair was growing distant at a rapid pace.

He left behind Naotsugu, whose convulsions had brought him to a standstill, and, invoking the same gravity control that Lina had, Tatsuya pursued that back.

◊ ◊ ◊

"Lt. Sirius has made contact with the target!"

"Response?"

"None!"

The secret command room that had been provided at the Japanese branch office of the USNA's dummy corporation had fallen into the state of a certain type of panic.

The capture operation had undergone changes beyond their control from the very first stage, but something like that would not cause Virginia Barans' limbs to shake.

The intervention of a combatant who was apparently an agent of the Japanese army was rather predictable.

The cause was something different.

Lina's arbitrarily leaving her station had begun the panic.

While the Stars commander, 'Sirius' had been given the right of independent movement, she had violated military regulations by not reporting it. However, now the operation for the team was in progress. This was not a situation where asking permission before you did anything was a good thing.

Also, Barans had left the usage of Brionac up to Lina's personal judgment but setting it off in the middle of the street was extremely unexpected.

"The target has begun pursuit of Lt. Sirius."

At the report of the new information, a little bit of calmness was returned to the mood of the control room.

When she considered the cleanup of this operation including the retrieval of Stardust, her head started to hurt. Nevertheless, for the time being, they were back on track. —That was all Lt. Col. Barans was going to think about.

(It might be that I must completely suspend the operation….)

"Summon the outside broadcast van."

The colonel effectively kept her true irritation out of her voice when she gave the command to the operator.

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Within the inviting light that could be seen all over the city, there was a passage where the light was interrupted.

A nightlessness of the city of Tokyo had given it a name, the zone where the black sky becomes a white background.

The park he had been invited to was also at the threshold of the lights.

No, it might be better to call it a vacant lot not a park. The hedges were maintained, but there were no play areas or benches. There were no more than token street lights positioned in it. Perhaps, in the war period, it had been public land maintained as a disaster prevention zone but the redevelopment process had probably neglected it.

Beneath those sporadic street lights, Lina revealed her golden hair.

Above her head, darkness hung over her like a cap.

From the beginning of this night, it hadn't been possible to see the moon or the stars in the cloudy sky but he understood that it wasn't just that from one glance.

Optical type magic was being used to obstruct surveillance satellites and stratosphere platform cameras.

Here, he was in the lair of the enemy.

Because he knowingly leapt into the enemy's trap, he was not surprised or flustered just now. Rather what was unexpected to Tatsuya was that there was no trace of magic being used other than concealment magic.

(Do they hate interference from fellow magicians……)

In short, the magic Lina was using was a technique so advanced that letting her attack alone was more effective than a mass attack where she would be forced to consider friendly troops.

Cancelling the illusion was probably done so she could concentrate her mind on the attack sequence.

(Just like I thought, it is 'Heavy Metal Burst'.)

"Tatsuya."

Just as he finished reconfirming his impression of the name of her attack, Lina opened her mouth.

"I didn't think you would come here so nonchalantly."

"Because, being followed so persistently is a bother."

Hearing his arrogant reply, Lina made a cruel smile.

"You're quite confident. But that is overly pretentious at a time like this."

Lina faced Tatsuya with the staff she was holding interposed between under her arm and her hand.

"Tatsuya, surrender. I don't know what means you use to dispel the effects of magic but you cannot dispel the effects of this Brionac."

To Lina, her statement was nothing more than a simple surrender demand.

(Bri-on-nac…..Brionake? Or 'Brionac'?)

Nevertheless, Lina's words gave the final piece to the nearly complete puzzle of the beam within Tatsuya's mind.

The name had meaning to him.

After the name completed the puzzle, part of many of its attributes were revealed.

As his mind was occupied with the inspection of his ideas, Tatsuya forgot to reply to Lina's demand.

Lina took that for a refusal.

She cannot be slandered as being hasty.

She had carelessly forgotten to establish a time limit on a reply, but not replying to a surrender demand according to tradition meant refusal.

Lina gripped the horizontal crosspiece that jutted out of one side of the staff.

That part without a doubt served the same function as the grip of a pistol.

Along the long thin eighty centimeters at the lower two thirds of the Brionac, a double helix of psion light ran; in the wider forty centimeter

cylinder upper third of the Brionac in front of the grip, a magic sequence was instantly constructed. Tatsuya who perceived it invoked Gram Dispersion and — realizing it would be too late, suspended it.

The tip of the cane glittered.

A thin ray of light was squeezed out and grazed Tatsuya's right arm.

Despite it only being grazed — Tatsuya's right arm from the elbow down was carbonized and blown away.

His body was twisted by the attack.

Tatsuya did not resist that force, he used it to propel himself behind the hedges.

Lina released her hand from the grip, and charged like the Brionac was a spear or something.

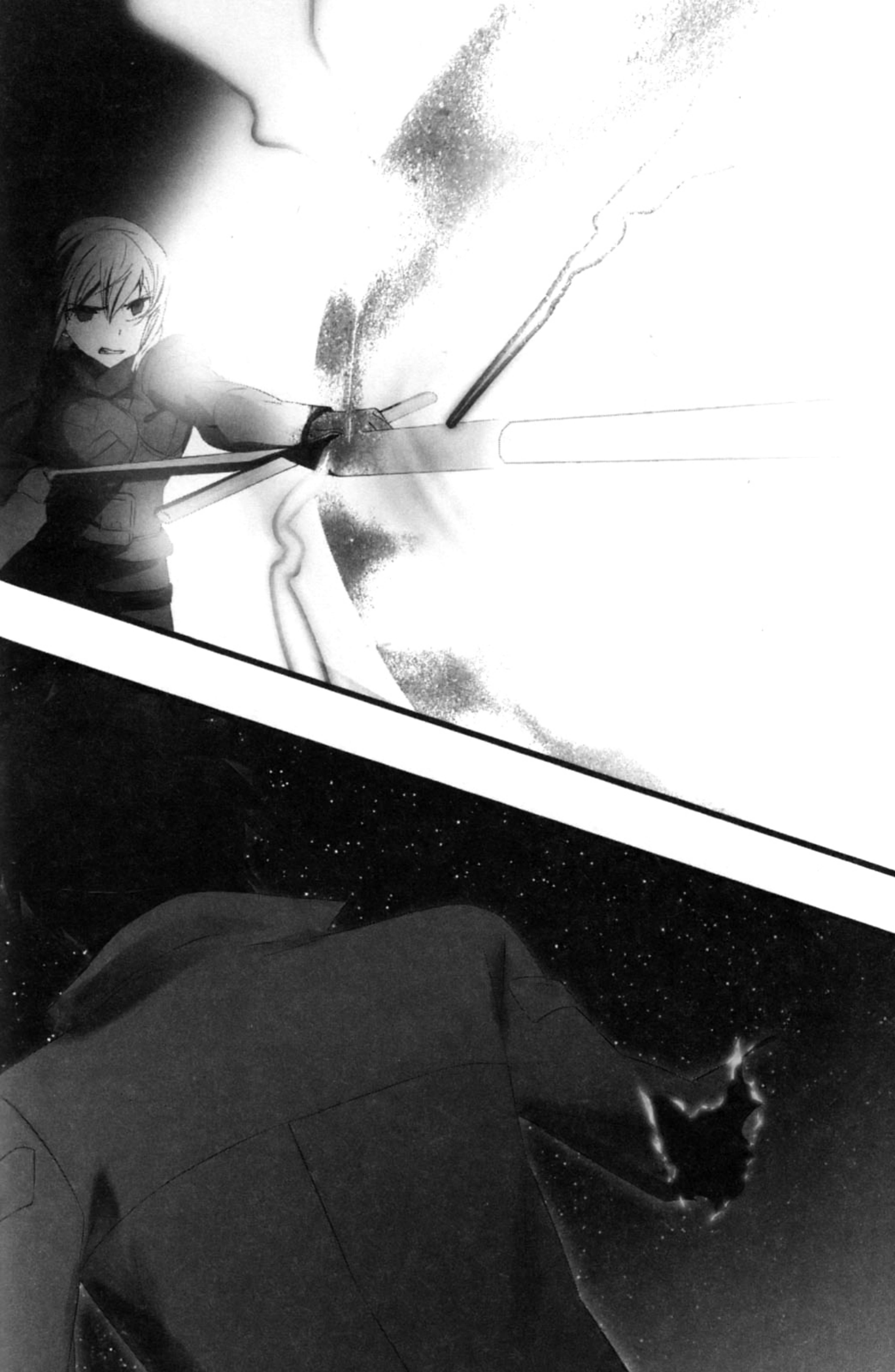
Within that interval, she horizontally swung it at the hedges Tatsuya was hiding in.

The live wood caught fire here and there. The hedges were only shrubbery.

The plasma did not reach Tatsuya who was behind them.

Before the eyes of Tatsuya who was half kneeling with his right shoulder lowered to conceal the right side of his body, a fantastic glowing plasma sword disappeared.

"Brionac…..'the label' is Brythonic. It is one of the weapons of 'Lleu' the light god of Celtic Myth. Does the title mean it is a reproduction of the mythical weapon?"



While he was in that posture, Tatsuya questioned Lina who was walking toward him.

The voice was not blurred with pain, his resistance to pain was probably high, Lina thought.

Extensive training against torture was not unusual for special forces.

"You're worrying about that? Now, when you are at a critical juncture between living and dying."

Within the staff, the magic sequence was again instantly invoked.

The congealed metal dust was disintegrated into high energy plasma by the magic.

The phenomenon known as 'high energy plasma' was created by magic, but the container it was bound in changed shape in accordance to Lina's thoughts.

As an incandescent blade crackling with electricity was thrust at the tip of his nose the final piece slid into place within Tatsuya's mind.

"It bothered me. People like to give names with meaning. Brionac was a spear that sent a spear tip shaped form of penetrating light bursting out of it at foes, perhaps it could be called a bullet of light that was freely thrown about like a spear. Although, in this case, freely probably takes a lot of guts."

"You copied a weapon of myth, a reproduction of the mythical weapon Brionac."

"To actualize the theory of FAE……. Just what can be expected from the technical might of the USNA."

Until then Lina hadn't been interested in the statements she was hearing from Tatsuya but her eyes widened at the phrase 'FAE' and her face stiffened.

"…How do you know about the theory of FAE?"

Seeing Lina's astonishment, Tatsuya also looked surprised.

"It's probably not all that strange. Because the FAE theory originally was espoused for a short time in a joint laboratory belonging to Japan and America."

"That was a secret lab! Furthermore, the documents from that lab were disposed of!"

"Nevertheless, they were not actually destroyed. Isn't the reproduction of the mythical weapon you have in your hands the best proof of that?"

While Tatsuya peered at the Brionac Lina had,

"FAE — Free After Execution."

That name conjured deep emotions.

"In Japanese, it is called the theory of controlling phenomenon after it had been created but Free After Execution is a better way of expressing it. The phenomenon produced as a result of being transformed by magic is already a phenomenon that was not originally in this world. Immediately after transformation the shackles of the laws of physics are loose. Perhaps it would be better if I changed it to a short time lag exists before the laws of physics reassert themselves after an event produced by magic."

The totally inappropriate explanation made in a lecturing tone created a mysterious void in the middle of this battle to the death.

"According to the theory of FAE, if plasma constructed by magic which is supposed to scatter chaotically can be easily given directional movement then even without flash freezing, plasma can go from a super heated state to normal temperature for an arbitrary period of time, rendering it harmless. It is restrained from scattering naturally because maintaining fixed state is also possible. That is the method."

Lina had forgotten about interrupting Tatsuya's long winded speech and had just grasped Brionac's hasp.

"Nevertheless, if you use the time lag in the law of physics presupposed by the FAE theory, it is only an instant. It is considered impossible for a magician who has just made the invocation to add new conditions to the newly constructed phenomenon."

At this point, Tatsuya made a mid-shrug like expression with his face.

"That's true. There's less than a millisecond to define the phenomenon which isn't possible for a human."

And his face showed a completely sincere wonder.

"To do that……within a containment barrier isolated from the influence of the world's physical laws, magic is executed to expand that gap in the law of physics."

This was a manifestation of the emotions of the boyish part of Tatsuya, who desired to follow the path of science.

"I humbly praise this person. To bravely evade the law of physics. The person who constructed 'Brionac' is a true genius."

"Tatsuya!"

Lina who had been listening to Tatsuya's words suddenly raised her voice. She had gotten rid of the plasma sword, and was once again poised to bombard him as she gripped Brionac when she interrupted Tatsuya. —It was the voice of someone forcibly revving up their lost combative will.

"I will say it once more. Surrender! You can't use your special techniques with one arm. You no longer have any way to win!"

Listening to Lina's wail, Tatsuya made a cruel smile. The smile was so inhuman that it made her shudder and didn't seem to be made by the same being who had shown her a different smile just a little while ago.

"If you are able to capture me, what do you want to do to me?"

However, despite the look on his face, Tatsuya's voice was not cold,

"Maybe experiment on me?"

With a rather sweet snare, he gently laid bare the wickedness of humans.

"Like those guys?"

Unhappily, Lina was sharp enough to understand that by 'those guys' he meant Stardust. The combination of stress and shock made Lina's face pale.

"Naturally……I refuse to become a guinea pig."

"Then don't move until I come to get you!"

The tip of the Brionac was at point blank range and aimed at his raised knee.

Into that gun barrel, Tatsuya thrust his gun shaped CAD, the custom Silver Horn, Trident.

With the right arm that was supposed to be blown away.

"That arm!?"

Lina shrieked.

Partly due to her shriek, her sequence invocation was slow.

Tatsuya had already drawn his magic.

The 'gun barrel' of the thrust out CAD — the aiming assistance device lead him to the target within the barrier containment unit.

Within the reproduction of a mythical weapon in the part that was supposed to be filled by the power of the USNA's strongest magician 'Sirius', the dissolution magic Mist Dispersion was invoked.

Metal particles changed to gas at normal temperature forcefully burst from Brionac's muzzle.

Due to the pressure from the gas, the Trident went flying from Tatsuya's right hand.

However, the impact it had on Lina was greater.

The thing she was holding so tightly backfired.

The unintended backlash blew Lina and the pieces of the Brionac backward.

The shock of being slammed to the ground caused the Eidos reinforced armor that protected Lina to fluctuate.

After picking up the Trident, Tatsuya invoked 'Restoration'.

He reconstructed the relative coordinate information using the data on CAD construction and his own body as reference points, and the Trident returned to his hand in repaired condition.

Tatsuya fired six shots of his 'dissolution' but it had no effect on Lina's magic barrier, it persisted in sticking to her limbs.

At the joints of both arms and legs, he was able to drill thin holes large enough to put a needle through. The four microscopic scars caused Lina intense pain equal to having a file whittle directly on her nerves.

She didn't have time to cry out in pain before her mind blew a circuit.

Her mind was swallowed by a white darkness.

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"Lina……"

After finishing his task, Tatsuya returned to where Lina was. He looked down at her body which still lay limp on the ground unconscious and murmured to her knowing she wouldn't be able to hear him.

"It would be better if you quit the army as soon as possible."

He had been saved by her softness in the skirmish that had just taken place.

Even only giving consideration to the battle power, Tatsuya should have had a much more difficult struggle.

As her first shot had reduced his right arm to cinders, he interrupted Gram Dispersion in order to avoid receiving greater damage; if he destroyed the information that coalesced it into a beam, the plasma would disperse. He had lost from the moment the beam had started coalescing, and if there had been wider dispersion of plasma when she fired then Tatsuya probably wouldn't have just lost only his right arm; as much as half his body could have been burned away. Of course, even if it was, his body would probably be instantly restored; however, that had become his winning move and without the sleight of hand with his right arm, he wouldn't have been able to launch a surprise attack.

From the beginning of the bombardment he had to avoid interfering with Lina in order to curb consecutive damage by using the extra time to construct how the 'path' was created. Even if he followed the path of the

shot by the shockwave it produced, without a doubt he would have been given enough damage to hinder his counterattack.

During the time the hedges were mowed down, he also shouldn't have avoided receiving damage. Despite the fact that in order to take away the enemy's ability to resist, the accumulation of damage was a cornerstone.

The long conversation on the theory of FAE wasn't necessary. There was absolutely no reason to disturb Lina by revealing the operating principle of the secret weapon.

In the last attack, she hadn't aimed at the legs, the power had been regulated to stop before the underlayer of the skin burned. By changing the orientation of the Brionac, she had lost critical time. It was not the time lag from being surprised by the restoration of his right arm but rather the time lag produced by moving Brionac that was actually the fatal one.

"Stars Commander 'Sirius'……I don't think the job is suitable for you."

Tatsuya muttered the words as he picked up Lina.

Chapter 14

When she opened her eyes, the scene that filled her vision was a ceiling – a ceiling that she seemed to recall belonged to the large cargo truck that served as their mobile base.

The dank, stale air caused her skin to feel clammy.

Still, if placed under the bitter cold, this would probably result in a cold, though complaining about the canned air right now would be pure decadence…… Lina thought.

Only half awake, Lina surveyed her surroundings.

Though there wasn't any particular intent behind her actions…… In her heart, the sense of unease was growing.

This wasn't normal.

The moment that crossed her mind, her sleepiness vanished.

"There's no one here……"

Given that she was now fully awake, it was unbelievable that she couldn't recall how this came about.

Though the vehicle was a large cargo truck that boasted the utility of being "something that can be driven on a camping trip", they weren't here for fun and games.

An incident must have occurred to prompt them all to leave.

The very fact that Lina had been defeated was stunning. Personnel could easily have been mobilized for observation as well as a search and rescue mission.

Still, it was plainly impossible for everyone to be absent.

(What is the reason for this?)

Based on her perspective, abandoning the mobile base was unthinkable.

In that case, who could possibly cause them to—

Suddenly struck by a thought, Lina hustled to the control panel that operated the observation cameras. She remembered that the interior of the

vehicle was monitored 24 hours a day. While she felt that this setting was a little out of date, this was still a viable method to recover her memory. At any rate, she turned back the record 10 minutes.

—Only to be greeted by a blank monitor.

(Eh?)

Lina's jaw dropped at the unexpected result and immediately fell into a sheepish smile since no one was watching her. She assumed that she had made a mistake manipulating the controls.

Once again, she carefully adjusted the record for 10 minutes ago.

—As expected, there was nothing.

She commanded the machine to rewind at 4 times the speed. She even swapped the speed. The rewound time changed to 1 hour ago, then two hours, even three hours.

No matter what she did, the end result was the same. The recording had been erased.

Lina frantically examined the data that was not attached to the monitor, only to find the cache had been wiped.

With a furious expression, Lina hammered at the keys before suddenly laying her hands on the keyboard. Though her fingers and palms stung, her inner agitation far outweighed these trivial matters.

(Right, I need to report this to Control……)

Unfortunately, Lina was once more thrust into a pit of frustration.

The entire communication console had been damaged by a clever technique that could not be identified from the outside.

She hit the console twice, then thrice before slumping powerlessly into the chair.

Her hands had grown numb and were slightly heated.

Lina carefully raised her hands to check for any injuries.

Luckily, she wasn't bleeding anywhere.

How childish would it be for her to injure herself in the throes of a tantrum? The fact that her display of anger wasn't recorded allowed Lina a small sight of relief.

Once she calmed down – she realized another detail that made her even more uneasy.

"There's no sign of any…… Pain, wounds?"

She ran her hands over both legs, then crossed her arms to check the shoulders and wrists.

But, the wound that brought her hideous pain and caused her to lose consciousness had vanished.

Not only was the injury gone, her clothing remained unblemished, nor was there any trace of blood.

"What is going on here……?"

All of a sudden, Lina's mind was starting to lose touch with reality.

—Which one was the truth?

—Had she truly been injured?

—Were they trying to make me unable to tell the difference?

—Maybe, they were……

(Could this be, Non-Systematic Magic…… Mental Assault?)

(Could it be…… That we have made a terrible mistake?)

(Tatsuya isn't a Magician who employs matter to energy conversion magic, but a Magician with outstanding compatibility with Mental Interference Systematic Magic…… An "Illusionist"?)

(……If that's true, then much can be explained.)

(The truth behind the charred arm reverting to its original form could be explained if I saw the illusion of "an arm being burnt".)

(Likewise, he might have broken through "Parade" because he has a higher degree of compatibility with illusions.)

(If purely in terms of direct application of Mental Interference Systematic Magic, then the nullification of "Muspelheim" also makes sense.)

(Since magic requires fine control, even if I didn't notice, once the mind has been sent off kilter then the magic would fizzle as well. This is much easier than destroying the magic itself.)

(After all, Tatsuya is the disciple of a "ninja" renowned for his skill in Illusion Magic. That Tatsuya himself is also a "ninja" is much more probable.)

All of this ran across Lina's muddled mind.

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Tatsuya had no way of knowing whether Lina persisted in her misguided way of interpreting the clues (not that it made much of a deal, since he only fixed her limbs and clothes) in a way that benefited him.

Compared to that, he had other pressing matters to handle.

There was still 20 minutes until he had to pick up Miyuki.

If possible, he wanted to ensure all the arrangements were in place.

Inside the automatic car, Tatsuya activated the heavily encrypted communication line.

"Ho, if it isn't Tatsuya-dono. Has something happened?"

"Hayama-san, my apologies for calling at such an hour."

The one who answered was the Yotsuba Family's butler, Hayama, though he was more of Yotsuba Maya's personal butler.

This line was a hotline that led directly to Maya.

"It is not too late in the evening, but unfortunately the madam has other urgent business and cannot come to the phone."

"Forgive my discourtesy."

Based on the time, she must be bathing. A definite miscalculation.

"This isn't something that requires repentance. According to my recollection, this must be the first time you have called in from your side. Things must be grave."

Just as the old butler pointed out, this was the first time Tatsuya activated this hotline.

In truth, asking the Yotsuba for help riled Tatsuya and was something he tried to avoid at all costs, but this wasn't the time to be stubborn.

This was a situation wholly unlike No Head Dragon or the invasion of the Great Asian Alliance, where strength alone was enough to carry the day.

Hayama, who stood at the core of the Yotsuba Family, undoubtedly had access to more information and clues than Tatsuya did. However, in order to tap into that power, tradition dictated that Tatsuya personally explain the situation at hand.

"In reality, we were just under attack from a USNA squad. The first attack was beaten back thanks to intercession from the second son of the Chiba Family, Chiba Naotsugu, but damage from Stars' High Commander Angelina Sirius rendered him unable to continue. Afterwards, I engaged Sirius—"

—After striking down Lina, Tatsuya couldn't even afford wasting time on restraining her as he walked towards the parking lot at the park's edge. Not that there was any need for him to do so. Even if Lina recovered consciousness, movement was impossible. Assuming she could block out the pain, under her current state with the nerves responsible for movement severed, standing or crawling were both out of the question. He had attacked Lina's limbs precisely for this reason.

Furthermore, if she had been trained in the very beginning to feel no pain, then she wouldn't have fallen unconscious in the first place, thus Tatsuya concluded that Lina wasn't likely to awaken any time soon.

Thus, his first priority was the enemy's reserves.

Currently, the Light (light wave oscillation type) Magic overhead that was blocking any "sight" was still in effect. This was the obvious approach since there were no worries about recording Lina's real visage. Yet, at the same time, this implied that the reserves were forced to come here directly.

Because the USNA military would never abandon "Sirius".

In order for them to retreat, they must dispatch a unit to recover Lina.

This time frame was precisely the opening for Tatsuya to slip through.

The enemy should be expecting Tatsuya to strike at this time and be appropriately on guard. After all, they had witnessed him striking down Sirius. Nevertheless, leaving the reserve force alone was not an option for Tatsuya.

It wasn't like he could execute Lina.

Though he could not kill her, at the very least he could still restrain her.

Still, killing or capturing her posed major issues of their own.

Tatsuya had already buried one of the international Strategic-Class Magicians known as the "13 Apostles". Though it was not Tatsuya's intent to do so, he had already fundamentally upset the world's balance. The aftershocks of him wiping out another Strategic-Class Magician that balanced the international balance of power were simply unimaginable.

However, the support personnel were another story altogether.

In regards to those who plainly bore him enmity – they were possibly an organization that sought to capture him for use as an experimental subject. These people sought nothing less than his destruction.

For such opponents, mercy was not required.

They required a reminder of the cost when it came down to tangling with Tatsuya in the shadows.

Though he was unable to concentrate on the reserve force during his standoff with Lina, now that he reached out with his senses once more, he found that they were still in their original positions and hadn't moved yet. After the shocking turnaround with their trump card taken out, they were probably still waiting for orders from command. There was no other explanation for their delayed reaction.

Although this was perfectly plausible, Tatsuya felt that this was too naïve.

In the event of a tactical retreat, forming a combat squad was of utmost priority.

He should say they had too much hubris.

Of course,

(This was the time that he should be thankful for their oversight.)

If the enemy had launched an all-out frontal assault, it was plain that he might have succumbed before the force of numbers. After intentionally creating a situation where Lina would square off against Tatsuya 1-on-1, he could only say that they had too much hubris on their side.

On the other hand, the enemy might have also taken into consideration that they couldn't cause a spectacle in another nation's capital.

Regardless, for Tatsuya, this was an excellent opportunity to take advantage of.

Skipping the time needed for proper aim, Tatsuya used his own ability to lock on before clicking the trigger on his CAD.

The targets were the electronic equipment in the cargo truck.

The first shot struck the communication line, the second fell on the power supply leading to the camera systems on the outside, and the third landed on the power supply feeding the cameras in the interior. Originally, magic wasn't a technique that could be properly employed against electrical equipment. For that, he had to thank Fujibayashi and Sanada's influence.

Though any personal communication devices were still operable, Tatsuya had no time for such things as he laid a hand on the cargo truck's door. The door wasn't locked.

Nor was there any biological verification for anti-theft prevention.

Instead, he was greeted by a hailstorm of bullets.

Maybe it was thanks to high quality silencers or special ammunition, but there were practically no sounds of gunshots. For Tatsuya, who stood in the doorway's shadow, it was more like the dulled open and release of an assault rifle.

However, the gunshots quickly stilled.

That was because the decomposition of weapons was one of the magics he was most well versed in.

Men leaped out from the car door brandishing knives.

Activation Sequences filled the car's interior.

Close quarters combat from the front followed by Flying-Type equipment support in the rear – the situation looked to be a magical assault. Slightly traditional, but undoubtedly an effective tactic.

Naturally, that was under the assumption that Tatsuya was unable to discern his opponents' Activation Sequences.

So long as he acted during the deployment phase of the Activation Sequence, psion bullets would be sufficient even if he didn't use decomposition.

Tatsuya reached out with his empty left hand.

In his left hand, he created the basic form of the compressed psion bullet, Far Strike, that he had been furiously training. Not only did he target the developing Activation Sequence, but mercilessly included the caster as well.

Tatsuya saw the Activation Sequence shatter into pieces.

Though the enemy Magicians were able to deflect the psion backlash, the damage suffered from the psion bullet rendered them unable to prepare the next spell.

Of the three combat personnel who leaped forward, two were already staggering.

Far Strike affected the astral form rather than the physical form, the soul to be specific. While it was more effective against human beings trained to use their willpower to control the physical body, experts in "chi" utilization would be able to deflect or avoid the attacking psion bullets.

In other words, it was super effective against half-assed Magicians who failed to properly learn how to control their physical flesh.

The aforementioned half-assed Magicians were hanging on because they didn't want to lose face in front of Tatsuya. The last remaining Magician appeared to be a believer in the Asian arts of discipline.

A simple, straight forward fight actually made it more difficult.

Tatsuya seized the initiative first.

He exchanged the CAD in his right hand for the dagger-shaped equipment that belonged to Lina and tightened his grip.

He swung his right arm from the left shoulder forward and hurtled the blade towards the center of the chest belonging to the enemy who had not been affected by Far Strike.

The unexpected throwing attack was launched at extremely close range.

The trajectory of the dagger was such that injuries could not be avoided even if blocked.

As expected of an expert, the man elected to choose to "avoid" the blow.

Yet, the man's evasive maneuver fell along Tatsuya's calculations. Precisely because the action was too logical, planning for it also became easier.

The man raised his left shoulder and leg while the right arm holding the dagger swung outwards from the inside, causing the hurtled dagger to fly past his flank.

Based on his posture with the right arm extended outwards swung down toward his left flank, the next attack was not going to come from the blind spot at his right back, but from lower below.

Tatsuya kicked out with his right leg.

Seeing the pivot foot during the throwing motion make such an irregular movement, the man was unable to hide his shocked expression. The man's right hand that was warily held in a tight fist and had just returned due to the centrifugal force of his movement took Tatsuya's kick dead on.

The man didn't lose the dagger in his grip.

Biting back the sudden pain from the kick on his wrist, he planned on striking down Tatsuya's kick.

If the pivot foot provided the blow, then that foot must have been used to jump. In reality, Tatsuya was currently in a state with both feet off the ground. If the force of his blow had been blocked, then no matter how agile Tatsuya was, his sense of balance would be compromised. –If this fight was going to be decided on pure physical blows alone.

This time, Tatsuya activated the Gravity Control-Type Magic lurking ahead of time in the magical calculation area. For a continuous 3 seconds, the axis would alter over ten times during the Flying-Type Magic. After his right leg had been blocked, Tatsuya continued to rise in the air without touching the ground and delivered a roundhouse kick with his left leg.

This time, the man didn't even have time to react.

The left heel struck the back of the man's neck directly.

A heavy sound came from the impact as well as the feeling of a solid hit.

This was a sound Tatsuya was well familiar with, the sound of bones breaking under a kick.

The man's body flew sideways.

Dictated by inertia, Tatsuya's body slid towards the left.

A blade pierced his afterimage. The weapon was thrown by one of the two companions accompanying the man who had successfully defended against Far Strike.

Though he was still under the influence of Flying-Type Magic, Tatsuya's feet still touched the ground.

He used magic to lessen the force of contact.

At a speed beyond the human body – at least a speed that Tatsuya's body could not achieve, Tatsuya rushed towards the two of them.

The CAD he held in his right hand had already been returned to its holster when he whipped out the dagger.

Afterwards, he didn't use magic to slow himself down but used the forward leaping movement to harness the kinetic energy. At the same time he launched off the ground, he sent his right arm that was fueled by inertia and the kinetic energy straight into the enemy's chest.

This was not a fist, but a palm strike directed towards the enemy's heart position.

Upon being struck, the man was lifted bodily from the ground and sent flying.

Tatsuya lowered his height slightly and once more made contact with the ground on his feet.

Flying-Type Magic was still active for another second.

After he jumped two meters into the air, the sound of oncoming bullets could be heard from behind him as they fell where he stood earlier.

The shots came from within the vehicle. The assailant must have picked up another firearm to replace the deconstructed assault rifle. Nonetheless, adopting that tactic at this stage was far too late.

Tatsuya pulled out a gun from his waist.

This was not the handgun-shaped CAD he usually held, but a real gun that he also took off of Lina.

He turned in mid-air and returned a gift of lead towards the shooter poking out from the window. After Tatsuya's bullets pierced his chest, the man's body slid from the window back into the car.

Immediately, Tatsuya landed atop the third man.

His right foot stamped on the shoulder while his left foot snapped the collarbone as it landed.

His body, free of any more magical influences, landed behind the third man just like that.

The ensuing rain of bullets that splashed around his body was a clear sign of how panicked the opposing shooter was.

Though it was difficult to hit the enemy taking cover in the car, there was thankfully only one opponent left.

After using gunfire to suppress the enemy and charging into the car, Tatsuya surveyed the situation and couldn't help but feel a little let down.

Besides the two who had been shot and killed, there were two other men knocked unconscious on the floor.

Based on the CADs on their wrists, both of them should be supporting Magicians.

It appeared that Far Strike had a few unintended effects. This also reinforced that Yakumo's training was particularly effective.

As insurance, Tatsuya stomped on every man's chest to check for any reaction before hurtling the bodies of the slain and unconscious out the car.

Since Lina's gun had a small muzzle, the bodies luckily didn't show any major wounds. Though everyone had a few holes on their bodies, not a whole lot of blood escaped.

After making a copy of all the records on board, Tatsuya set about wiping all the onboard machines.

After taking into consideration that the next group of guests would clean up after him, Tatsuya did a cursory job wiping away the blood and exited the vehicle.

Throughout this entire sequence, Tatsuya pretended that he was oblivious to the mysterious individual spying on him.

"—When I carried Angie Sirius over to the vehicle, there was no trace of the subjugated reserve force."

"Were they taken by the observer?"

"I assume they decided that this outweighed my continued observation, since by the time I returned, the immobile Chiba Naotsugu had also disappeared."

After listening to Tatsuya's situation report, Hayama adopted a contemplative posture. Given that there was no way to see if he was putting on an act, this could only be chalked up as an older man's extensive experience.

"Looks like our observer is closely connected to the Saegusa Family."

"The Saegusa Family? Are you sure it's not the Chiba Family?"

"Tokyo belongs to the Saegusa Family's jurisdiction. We have also caught wind of Koichi-sama's subordinates taking certain actions."

Koichi-sama was the head of the Saegusa Family, so Tatsuya naturally understood that this was referring to Saegusa Koichi. The names of the

various heads within the Ten Master Clans were common knowledge among Japanese Magicians.

"Limiting the usage of magic to a minimum and primarily relying on close quarters combat to settle the issue are both born of the fact that you are aware of the surveillance, but ultimately this was something to be avoided if possible given the observer."

None of the string of events that started since April were instigated by Tatsuya. He had always become embroiled in the events because he had been dragged in. Regardless, Tatsuya was very cognizant that a guardian like him being so conspicuous was not a wise course of action, so he demurred.

"Still, we are also aware that Tatsuya-dono has not done anything worthy of blame. Although protecting one of the candidates for the next head of house, Miyuki-dono, is your mission, you are definitely not the only one assigned to this task. Even if she is not yet by Maya-sama's side, it is far too early for the other families to be aware of Miyuki-dono's position. Of course, given that this is Koichi-sama, he may already have caught on……"

Caught on must refer to the idea that Tatsuya was someone affiliated with the Yotsuba Family. Tatsuya was inwardly impressed that this was still "caught on" and not a "growing concern".

"In spite of this, we cannot allow them to seize any evidence that would move beyond speculation. Tatsuya-dono, please transfer the copied data over to me. I will begin handling the USNA military side."

The light words that dropped from Hayama's mouth sounded like a proud boast to Tatsuya's ears.

In terms of numbers, the Yotsuba Family were plainly outnumbered by the Saegusa and Ichijou Families. Yet, their combat prowess were comparable. In 1-on-1 confrontations, the Yotsuba would have the advantage. Despite their limited numbers, they were more than capable of becoming the counter-terrorism trump card and carrying out actions that went beyond the reach of the law that the government needed. In terms of black ops and assassinations, none among the "Numbered Families" could match the Yotsuba Family.

"So long as we don't leave an opening for the JSDF to intervene, Koichi-sama shouldn't be able to intercede directly."

The other agents were another story altogether, but at least Hayama's words were trustworthy.

At the same time he hit the switch for the communication line, Tatsuya bowed deeply before the camera.

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The instant she saw Tatsuya's face as he arrived to pick her up, Miyuki's eyes widened in shock.

"Did something happen?"

"No, nothing's the matter."

Though the response was immediate, Miyuki understood very well that those were only superficial words meant to cover the situation.

"Onii-sama, you aren't hurt right?"

All of a sudden, Miyuki hugged Tatsuya tightly.

This actually threw Tatsuya for a loop.

"No, Miyuki, please calm down a little."

"I can't possibly calm down! This "smell"…… Onii-sama, you fought against Lina, right!? And, it wasn't one-on-one, right!? You 'smell' like you fought against ten people at least!"

Just as Tatsuya could use sight to capture "information", so too could Miyuki detect "information" through touch. However, Miyuki was more capable than that, as she could also use smell to receive knowledge that was practically instinct. Although Tatsuya carried no traces of physical injuries, he still carried the "scent" of battle.

"Please, I'm asking you to settle down a little."

Having someone feel concern over him was something worth cheering about, but there was no way to converse if she could not calm down.

"You should know that no one is capable of leaving a mark on me."

Anyone else might have been bemused by those words, but Miyuki immediately grasped the meaning within.

Gradually, her excitement settled.

Five seconds later, she had entirely calmed.

"……Onii-sama, my sincere apologies for my display."

Not only was she apologizing verbally, but even his sister's body was huddled together in embarrassment. Tatsuya couldn't help but smile – maybe he felt a smile was the only proper way to respond – and slightly shook his head.

"No worries. I was the one who caused you to worry."

"Such a thing…… Of course a sister would be concerned for Onii-sama's safety."

Of course? Though that question flashed across Tatsuya's brain on reflex, he was well aware that voicing that aloud was taboo.

It was nothing more than a thought.

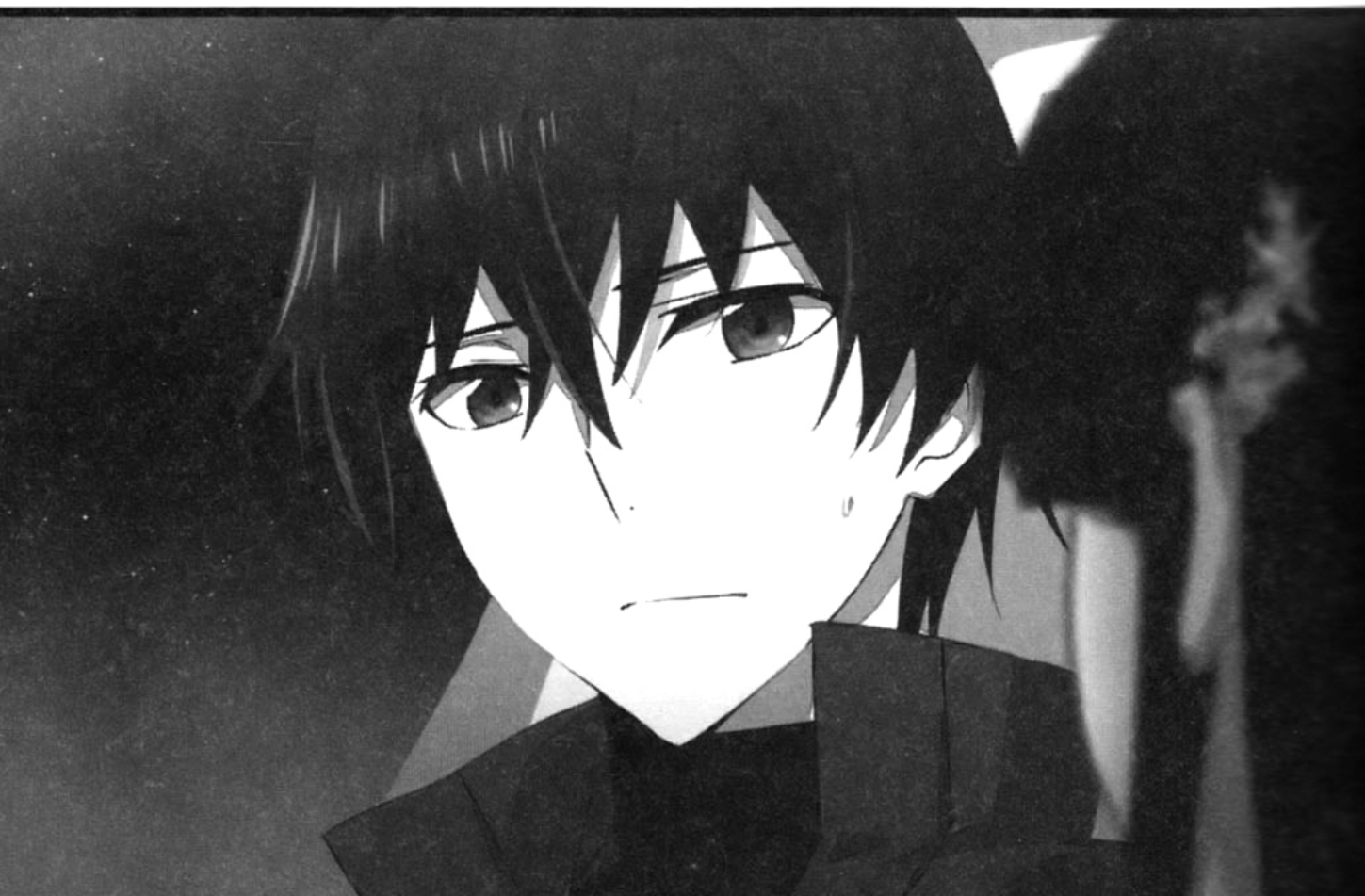
True, feeling concern for others was a matter of course, but Miyuki's fervor was slightly atypical.

"Naturally, there's no way Lina could beat you no matter how she challenged you. That's because there's no one in the world who can beat Onii-sama."

As he watched his sister spout her usual fervent words, Tatsuya self-consciously watched her with slightly colder eyes.

As long as Miyuki believed in him, he had to meet that expectation no matter the cost. This thought truly existed somewhere in his heart, an understanding born of both determination and pride.

Yet, at the same time, his own objectivity that was completely unrelated to this understanding saw that this was far too dangerous.



If not for the fact that his opponent was an emotionally immature young lady of 16 years, if both sides had brought their full might to bear, he might have been the one who fell in the end.

However, even if he wasn't relieved of his duties, it would be terrible if his principle detected this sort of defeatist thinking.

Which is why, more than ever, he needed to present an indomitable front.

"So long as you are waiting for me, I will bow to no one."

Except, these words seemed a little overkill.

Rather, the presentation was a tad "overkill".

Tears formed at the corners of Miyuki's eyes.

Seeing the warm gaze Miyuki directed towards him, Tatsuya realized that he had made a tactical error.

Nonetheless, there was no way for him to take back the words he spoke.

Nay, even if he could erase them, this situation was beyond his control.

In addition, Miyuki was in a state that went well beyond any easy means of defusing.

(……Oh well, still better than being mercilessly interrogated.)

Right now, Tatsuya's mind was filled with escapist thoughts.

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By the time Lina returned to her apartment, it was already the next day. Furthermore, it wasn't right after midnight, but rather "far later". At the very least, the sun hadn't risen when she returned home, so at least she could draw a little comfort from that.

While all of her equipment had been confiscated, for some inexplicable reason Brionac was still with her, so personal safety wasn't going to be an issue.

Unfortunately, since her communication device had been taken away, there was no way to call a car to pick her up.

Furthermore, since she always used electric currency, she wasn't carrying her purse. Even more importantly, in order to prevent any investigation on her combat operation, she didn't bring any personal items either. Thanks to that, even 24 hour public transportation was denied to her, forcing her to walk all the way home.

Since her Specialized and Generalized CAD were both gone, Flying-Type Magic and high speed mobility magic were both inaccessible. By the time she finally arrived at the apartment she lived at thanks to intermittent Leaping techniques, Lina was practically on the verge of tears.

If anyone had been unfortunate enough to witness her state, Lina might have fired with Brionac on reflex out of incredible shame.

Thanks to biological identification, Lina managed to get inside without much trouble.

At the same time she breathed out a sigh of relief, fury roused within her.

(Do you hate me or something, Tatsuya!?)

From an objective perspective, Lina had a mountain of reasons to complain about him. Even so, the majority of them came from her emotions. In the end, thanks to her military training, she broke through these feelings and remembered what her priorities were.

First, she opened the signal to the command center. However, no matter how she signaled, she failed to receive a reply.

Cold sweat dripped down Lina's back. In order to dispel the dark premonition in her heart, Lina furiously shook her head.

She tried using the communicator in her room once again to call the command center. Earlier, she still bore hope that "the signal wasn't going through", but as she repeatedly called out, this hope flickered and died.

What happened to the colonel, Lina couldn't help but think.

Lina swiftly equipped herself with CADs and other weapons, told herself to buck up, then jumped off the balcony into the night sky.

Her destination ahead of her was the skyscraper that housed their secret command center.

By the time she discovered that the place was abandoned, it was well after an hour since she began her thorough search.

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The next morning.

The news on the television reported that a small USNA vessel was found in Japanese waters and had been rescued by the Japanese Naval Defense Force after said vessel was left adrift after suffering mechanical failure.

However, the news failed to mention as to why a high ranking officer stationed at the Tokyo embassy was on board.

Additionally on that day, the beautiful transfer student at First High continued to call in sick on account of physical infirmity.

Chapter 15

As he ate breakfast while watching the morning news, Tatsuya noticed that he was unconsciously nodding along and hurriedly stopped his head motions. Fortunately, Miyuki's eyes were drawn to the television, so she remained oblivious to Tatsuya's odd movements.

"Mechanical failure? But I didn't see any forecast regarding hurricanes or thick fog."

Miyuki's skepticism arose from the news that a small American naval vessel drifted within Japanese territorial waters.

"It's hard to imagine that machines would have such a large breakdown, so it probably has something to do with the motor. In this age of automated machinery, the chance that this is caused by human failure while moving in the wrong direction is slim."

Seeing the pose his sister struck as she simply(?) accepted his word as truth while nodding along, he couldn't help but feel that his soul was being corrupted. –Of course, Tatsuya was self-aware enough to know that was nothing more than a misconception.

On the other hand……

(Even if this is Oba-ue's direct order, the execution speed is simply too quick.)

Based on the time that the drifting vessel had been taken under "protection" and cross referenced against the time Tatsuya contacted Hayama, forget half a day, the entire episode from attack to clean-up was completed in barely half that time.

In other words, they were currently embroiled in secret warfare while their fighting strength was highly restricted, but their opponent was a nation's professional army. This was no militia found in small developing countries, but most likely the elite of the elite from a major superpower.

No matter how capable the Yotsuba agents were, this was an unbelievable operation tempo.

In short,

(By the time I made contact, they had already distributed their assets.)

In regards to exactly what their plans were, that he was not privy to. Maybe this was a natural coincidence, or perhaps they had planned on not interfering in the first place.

Nor was it impossible that they simply wanted to see Tatsuya bow down to them and request for aid.

(Regardless of what it is, it's not like I feel like I owe them anything.)

No matter what the background was, Tatsuya was satisfied so long as the end result was moving in the positive direction.

Miyuki intentionally portrayed her agreement to the motor malfunction explanation while she sneaked a peek at her brother's visage.

Her brother didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary from her.

While small motions that misled her brother strained her, she also wanted to keep a few things from her brother at times.

Miyuki deposited the utensils and dinnerware in the kitchen and left the cleanup to the HAR (Home Automation Robot) before heading upstairs to her room to change.

Standing in front of the mirror, Miyuki gave a small sigh.

Miyuki didn't even need to watch the news to know something was afoot.

After Tatsuya left for his morning training after breakfast as usual, Miyuki received a phone call from Maya.

The contents informed her that "the USNA troops threatening Tatsuya's surroundings have been dealt with."

Still, Miyuki remained unaware of which specific members of the Yotsuba Family conducted the operation. Thus, the only person to whom Miyuki conveyed her thanks was Maya. Despite knowing that these were methods to monitor her, Miyuki was genuinely grateful.

Additionally, Miyuki requested that Maya, who typically did not look at her brother or her with favor, to keep all of this from Tatsuya.

(How sly of me…… If Onii-sama knew the truth about this, then he would think that I'm a terrible girl……)

On one hand, Miyuki wished to prevent Tatsuya thinking of her as a dolt.

On the other hand, she simultaneously tried her utmost to ensure Tatsuya didn't view her as a smart child.

From the bottom of her heart, Miyuki didn't want to weigh her brother down.

Yet at the same time, the one thing she absolutely abhorred was for her brother to believe "my little sister doesn't need me anymore".

Once she became the head of the Yotsuba Family and was fully independent…… Once he came to that conclusion, her brother may leave her side.

Even if he wasn't leaving, he would probably still keep his distance.

That was the nightmare that constantly tormented Miyuki.

Miyuki and Tatsuya were siblings by blood.

As she grew older, leaving her brother was a matter of course - just as he would naturally grow apart from his sister.

Miyuki also understood that one day she must marry.

She would be forced to accept someone other than her brother as her husband.

Though this was against Miyuki's wishes, society and this country called Japan would never allow her not to do this, so long as she was a talented Magician with hereditary genes boasting powerful magical qualities.

This was not something far off in the distant future, but something looming rather closely.

In the modern age, Magicians were required to marry early. This was especially the case for female Magicians, so that they could marry quickly and bear children. The reason behind this was that the sooner a Magician was born generation-wise, the greater the tendency for him or her to wield innately powerful magic. Scientists referred to this as "magic seeping into hereditary genes". The differences between the greatest Magicians of each generation weren't obvious, but the average power level was on the rise. Their parents' generation surpassed their grandparents' generation, just as they too surpassed their parents. While this would level off sooner or later,

everyone was still bound by the overwhelming urge to bring forth the next generation as quickly as possible.

It wasn't strange for female students who applied for magical universities to suddenly drop out to raise children.

Mutations with unstable life expectancies were not under this restriction, but even now, well into the second or third generations, there was still a duty in the eyes of the public to bear children at a young age. Their mother marrying late and their aunt who maintained her steadfast resolve to remain single were both exceptions, accepted only because of inescapable physical reasons.

Miyuki was the picture of perfect health, so none of those reasons applied.

Not to mention, she was seen as the next head of the Yotsuba Family, a bearer of exceptional genes.

In reality, she wouldn't do anything of that nature with any boy save her brother. These were Miyuki's true feelings. No, the real truth of the matter was that she detested all the other boys except for Tatsuya.

It wasn't a biological issue, so something like dancing was still acceptable. However, in Miyuki's heart, the only who was allowed to touch her was Tatsuya. The only one who could do as he wished with her was Tatsuya alone.

The reflection in the mirror was that of herself clad in her underwear. As she looked upon herself, Miyuki couldn't help but think. These fingers and this hair, lips, bosom, the secret places that no one was allowed to see, everything was available for Tatsuya to touch if he willed it. If it was Tatsuya, she was willing to do anything.

—No matter if it was her body or heart, everything that she was belonged to Onii-sama—

This was Miyuki's truth, a wish that came from the bottom of her heart akin to prayer.

Yet, Miyuki also knew that these feelings would never come to pass.

That was what she thought.

(Even if I'm just a shameful little sister…… No, it would be even better if I seem like an unreliable, shameful little sister. If this will allow me to stay by Onii-sama's side forever……)

As she thought this, she also worked hard to ensure she was not resented by Tatsuya.

All of this summed up the conundrum Miyuki was faced with.

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After stepping into the classroom for Year 1 Class E, Tatsuya noticed the unusual atmosphere and swept his gaze back and forth.

He immediately found the reason.

The arrangement of the 25 seats in the class was normally harmonious with boys and girls mixed together.

Tatsuya sat behind Leo, Mizuki sat to his left – and the source of the turmoil came from one row across from the seat next to the window.

Fuming, Erika sat there looking out the window. Displeasure seemed to ooze out of her very being as she sat in that posture.

(Well…… I guess that can't be helped.)

Tatsuya had a clear grasp on the source of the displeasure. Based on that adoring look from last summer, it was very hard for her to accept what happened last night.

"Tatsuya…… Erika-chan, what's going on?"

A voice called out to Tatsuya after he swept a quick glance over Erika before sitting down.

While watching Tatsuya's face, Mizuki kept half of her attention on Erika.

Even if it wasn't 80% or 90% of her attention on Erika, the only thing she could acutely perceive was that Tatsuya knew something.

Based on the looks from Mikihiko and Leo that looked like Mizuki's own, they also noticed.

However, there were things in this world that Tatsuya was unable to answer even if asked.

At the very least, he couldn't say "Last night, Erika's second brother was defeated by Lina".

"What is going on here?"

In the end, Tatsuya had no choice but to play dumb.

One of his friends' positive points was that they wouldn't fuss for too long. Their reasons differed in that this was Mizuki's nature, whereas Mikihiko and Leo had personal experiences with "things that they didn't want other people to know".

Still, it was inevitable for them to be somewhat influenced by this unnatural atmosphere.

The uncomfortable mood continued until the rare occasion when the five classmates separated during lunch – the term 'classmate' was used intentionally because Miyuki and Honoka were usually included in the mix.

Any change in the situation happened after school.

Just as he told his sister last night, Tatsuya swiftly negotiated (in secret) with the holder and privately borrowed Pixie.

This was not for amusement purposes, but for an interrogation; except, the storage room belonging to the Robotics Club wasn't suited for that.

That being said, her garb was simply too eye-catching for waltzing around campus. He also wished to avoid any rumors or suspicions (of his interests), and with his objectives in mind, being conspicuous was simply not favorable.

Therefore, Tatsuya first ordered Pixie to change into a girl's uniform. The uniform was actually a costume for humanoid models that Mayumi borrowed from the Arts Club. There was some concern that the differences in the human skeletal structure and the machine's design might interfere with changing clothes, but the 3H's body proved to be more flexible than imagined, so both removing clothes and changing were possible. The lines in the lower half of the body were somewhat unnatural though, but Tatsuya had already planned ahead by preparing a uniform that was one size larger so that this detail wasn't as obvious. Anyone who passed by along

the halls would only assume that she was a female student. –Just in case, it should be stated that Tatsuya had no peculiar feelings while watching a humanoid robot changing clothes.

After all this, Tatsuya brought Pixie to an empty room in the labs and began his interrogation.

Setting aside the awkwardness of hearing a voice reverberate through his head and feeling the mysteriously burning hot gaze that had nothing to do with optics coming from robot's optics, Tatsuya began his questioning.

The questions he asked pertained to the "vampire incident". In particular, the victims clearly bore no sign of injury, yet an unbelievably massive amount of blood was missing from their bodies. Questions regarding this mechanic and the motive behind it. These were the topics that drew Tatsuya's attention ever since he heard about this incident.

"Were Parasites responsible for removing the blood from the victims?"

((YES.))

"Why did you need blood from living humans?"

((Blood loss was not our intent. That is the side effect of failed reproduction.))

"Please give a more detailed explanation."

((Our reproduction process begins by separating a part of ourselves and transplanting that portion into the body of a potential host. The separated portion will absorb the psions and pushions in the blood to grow, thus replacing the lost blood within the flesh of the vessel.))

"Hold on…… Replacing blood with yourself? As information bodies, you shouldn't have energy. Where does the energy from the replaced blood go?"

((It is consumed by the body during the assimilation process. If assimilation fails, then it would be transformed into gas and expelled out of the body along with the separated portion.))

"I see, so that's how it works…… Continue."

((If entry into the flesh is successful, then we are able to tap into the astral form of the information body.))

"Mutual use of the body, the information body and the material form, much like the theory behind magic."

((The astral form is the route that leads to the spirit. Once a connection has been made between the astral form and the vessel's spirit, then reproduction via assimilation has succeeded. Unfortunately, there are currently no examples of such success.))

"Reason being?"

((Unknown. I would like to know as well. Knowing the reason, only that feeling remains in my heart.))

"……How many of your companions are in this country?"

((At the time I took refuge in this vessel there were six.))

"Can Parasites communicate amongst one another?"

((YES.))

"What is your communication range?"

((Anywhere within this country's borders would be possible.))

"Where are the other Parasites currently located?"

((Locations unknown. Since residing in this body, the link to my companions has been severed.))

Pixie never hesitated when answering Tatsuya's queries.

There was no way to differentiate expressions on that face, but her cognitive pattern appeared to be in high spirits. This, at least, didn't seem like a misconception on his part. Exactly how accurately emotions could be conveyed across telepathy and to what degree those feelings could be disguised were both uncertain, but the feelings being sent across seemed like genuine happiness that she was able to assist Tatsuya.

Despite the callousness of this statement, it was undeniably chilling to be perceived in a positive light by a monster. Still, all of this could be relaxed when one recalled that the host was an "object" and not a human being. He made a clear distinction between the two, so this was nothing more than both parties using each another, thus he proceeded without a guilty conscience.

As the two of them sat alone (to be precise, more like one person and one machine) in the classroom, Erika entered the classroom during the lull in the interrogation.

"Tatsuya-kun, may I come in for a second?"

There was no way of telling if she calculated that this was the perfect time to make an entrance after eavesdropping or if this was pure coincidence.

Given that this was Erika, nothing would be awry even if she had overheard anything. Then again, since the question and answer session was done via telepathy, no one could overhear them no matter how hard they tried.

He had no complaints about the sudden request for entry.

Since this wasn't his room and he wasn't changing, there was no need to require people "to knock". However—

"I don't mind if you want to ask me something, but please rein in that killing intent of yours a little. I'm not completely blind, you know."

—He honestly wished she would calm down a little.

"Ah, sorry."

Erika herself seemed to be oblivious to that matter. She blushed in embarrassment after Tatsuya pointed it out.

"No, so long as you understand."

She truly appeared to be unaware, seeing how the porcupine-like aura that clung to Erika's body gradually faded into thin air.

In other words, she had added those emotions into the mix. He couldn't help but feel that she shared a few points of similarity with his sister, so he had to earnestly suppress the wry grin threatening to leak from his lips.

"Pixie, lock the door."

"Understood."

Switching places with Pixie, Erika now stood before Tatsuya.

Despite his encouragement for her to take a seat, she declined to do so. Erika maintained her standing position as she looked down at Tatsuya as he sat in his seat.

Since he understood the feelings running through her, Tatsuya didn't press the issue.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"You already know."

"Just the anticipated conversation?"

"Exactly…… Last night, a brother of mine engaged in a disgraceful performance."

Erika's response was within expected parameters, but Tatsuya had more than one answer prepared ahead of time.

"That's it?"

"At any rate, this comes first."

I see, so some things come first. Just as Tatsuya was about to say this, Erika continued on.

"Who was the other guy?"

There was no small talk involved as she asked her question directly. Speaking of which, seeing that she didn't even wait for an explanation of the opponent involved, she must be very agitated.

"USNA Military, Stars High Commander, Angie Sirius."

In response, Tatsuya's answer was also concise and direct.

Maybe because she didn't expect him to answer immediately, a cloud of confusion gathered around Erika.

"So, what are you going to do after hearing that?"

Taking advantage of Erika's momentary bemusement, this time it was Tatsuya who raised a question.

"That sort of thing…… Do you even need to ask?"

She appeared to be a little shocked at the direct question coming out of the blue, but she immediately fired back with a fierce look on her face.

"I can surmise what course of action you have in mind, but…… I recommend you give up, Erika."

"Are you saying that it's impossible for me?"

This was not the unconsciously expressed fury from before.

Tatsuya didn't even bat an eyelid as he absorbed this intentional display of wrath.

"It is impossible. Not because of talent, but from a results perspective."

"……What do you mean?"

The first half of that phrase was still buoyed by fury, but the latter half was switched by astonishment.

"You saw the news this morning, correct? It doesn't matter if it was the images or the words."

"I did. Which one are you talking about?"

"The news about the small USNA vessel left adrift."

"That one…… You can't mean?"

"How astute of you."

Upon seeing the change in Erika's facial expression, Tatsuya's words were not simple courtesy, but honest praise.

"Though this remains a mere possibility…… But 'Sirius' will likely not appear again. Even if both sides remain in a standoff, there is no benefit to be gained here for either side."

Erika didn't have an answer or rejection for Tatsuya's suggestion.

"Tatsuya-kun……"

In comparison, she was staring in all seriousness at Tatsuya as if she beheld a completely unidentifiable stranger.

"Who… What are you……?"

No, not "as if". She actually saw him as an enigma.

"That sort of thing, at least for my family…… That is beyond the Chiba Family."

"Is that so?"

Tatsuya wasn't playing dumb here, but he had no other options at this point.

"Not just our family. This is definitely impossible for families like Isori, Chiyoda, and Tomitsuka. I don't know exactly how this happened, but the only ones capable of getting that kind of result would be the Ten Master Clans. And even then, only……"

"I believe that's far enough, correct?"

"A lineage of incredible power. A family whose power base surrounds the capital, or a family who has free reign to act regardless of territory or jurisdiction."

She couldn't stop speaking.

"Erika, enough."

"Removing the Ichijou Family station in the north…… Then there is only Saegusa, Juumonji, or…… Yotsuba. Tatsuya-kun, you can't possibly be……"

"Silence!"

"Ah!"

Erika shut her mouth not because of the coarseness of Tatsuya's voice or the volume, but the intent mixed within.

"Any further would only result in things getting awkward for everyone."

Tatsuya calmly made that declaration.

Erika was not lacking in experience when it came to walking through the valley of death.

She was not falling quiet because she was overawed by his manner.

Rather, her extensive experience told her to do so.

Especially because she was about to recklessly cross over the line.

"……I'm sorry."

"As long as you understand."

The phrase was similar to the ones before. As usual, his tone was light.

However, cold sweat dripped down Erika's back.

"Erika, even if you wanted to find out who Sirius is, there is nothing for it now. Thus, let's just end things here."

"……You're right."

She understood that half the reason why Tatsuya changed the subject was for herself, so Erika acknowledged Tatsuya's proposal.

"Then, let's hear what else you wanted to know. I assume it has something to do with the Parasite's remnants?"

"Exactly, though this doesn't really merit praise. You wouldn't be Tatsuya if you couldn't discern things of this level."

Finally, she had regained her usual self at least for appearance's sake, which must mean she was aware of it now.

"Were those words of yours actually praise?"

"At the very least, I'm not demeaning you, right?"

During this charade, Erika was gradually resuming her typical state. This high degree of resilience was quite admirable.

"It's not like I planned on leaving things alone. You can count on me to let you know if I hear anything."

As he said this, Tatsuya directed a look at Pixie that was full of undercurrents.

Erika also sneaked a peek at Pixie before the corners of her mouth twitched upwards in a satisfied manner.

"Definitely, OK? In exchange, I will also be open about this and not hold anything back."

It was precisely Erika's personality to add a corollary to this part of their agreement now.

"Ah, agreed."

This was appropriate distance when it came down to his relationship with her.

"Then, Tatsuya-kun, sorry for bothering you."

"Ah, and please convey my regards to your older brother."

The hand Erika extended towards the door shook for a bit, but Erika quickly left the room as if nothing had happened.

Tatsuya had no further remarks for that.

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After leaving the classroom where she had the secret conversation(?) with Tatsuya, Erika quickly walked down the hall. After returning from the sparsely populated experimental building to the main floor, Erika leaned back against the wall of the corridor.

And heaved a giant sigh of relief.

As if finally realizing how deep of a hole she was in, cold sweat ran down her temple.

Thinking back on what happened, she couldn't help but think she was behaving strangely today.

Normally, she would never do something so silly like stepping on a tiger's tail.

—Scratch that, rather than calling that a tiger's tail, more like the untouchable scales of a dragon.

—Thanks to that, she knew clearly.

—She even knew the things that she didn't need to know.

(……How terrible.)

Erika's lips curled into a self-depreciative smile.

Once she drew back the curtain and witnessed what was going on, a lot of things suddenly made sense.

Originally, Erika didn't agree with "that person" who even called on her second brother's assistance to find out about Tatsuya. She thought that, as one of Tatsuya's companions, she should obstruct such a thing.

She had planned on safeguarding Tatsuya's secret.

Now, for some reason, she wasn't just "wanting to protect" but being "forced to protect".

This was not to say that if Erika leaked the secret that Tatsuya would come down on her with a vengeance.

(I get the feeling that even if I let it slip, Tatsuya would just laugh and forgive me.)

Still, everything had a "what if", which prompted some serious consideration on Erika's part.

There was no way she was going to put that to the test.

Just Tatsuya's ability alone would be incredibly difficult, and on top of that – though that only remained a possibility.

(Ah~~~~ ……I'm so confused. Seriously, I should've "let sleeping dogs lie".)

Why the heck did she say that, Erika wordlessly complained to herself.

Now that she thought about it, there was a sense that she was being led around.

(That's ridiculous…… That's pushing it too far no matter how evil Tatsuya-kun's personality is.)

Erika resolutely smiled to blow away all those hanging concerns.

She was furiously backpedaling away from the notion that he was capable of doing exactly that.

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(……Did that backfire on me?)

Tatsuya thought to himself as he kept staring at the door after Erika left.

He had considered the possibility that Chiba Naotsugu's intervention yesterday was the result of the Chiba Family joining the Saegusa Family, or more appropriately, the recon vanguard dispatched by JSDF intelligence bureau after being goaded on by the Saegusa Family, but this appeared to have nothing do with Erika.

Still, this may be as simple as Erika being not informed.

(Forget it. They would catch on sooner or later.)

In the end, Erika had already witnessed all sorts of things. Not only had she seen his powers, but also Miyuki's "Cocytus". Based on her outstanding instincts, all of this was simply a matter of time regardless.

(In the end, we pulled her in anyway.)

This development was not something that Tatsuya planned for in his scenario, but it was fine in his book so long as the result was alright, he thought.

Typically, it was impossible to keep a secret without a few conspirators.

There were situations where the person in question simply could not cover everything by themselves. Strictly speaking, that was because those who sought these secrets acted behind the backs of the person in question. At that time, the ideal scenario was for the seeker to run into a third party that happened to be the conspirator.

Tatsuya unilaterally drew the curtain on this incredibly selfish monologue.

"Pixie."

((Yes, Master.))

Tatsuya more or less understood that when conversing with Pixie using telepathy, they were communicating with concepts rather than words. The image being sent over was then translated into words by the receiving side.

Even while wearing a servant's garb, being called "Master" by someone wearing the same school uniform still threw him out of sorts. Still, this was how the other entity felt and once this became a habit during their telepathic communication, there was nothing he could do about it.

Nonetheless, Tatsuya was glad that at least the term hadn't translated into something like "My Lord" or "Milord". After all, this was his personal preference when it came down to language.

Since she(?) used a mobile form of telepathy, Tatsuya believed that she was unaware of this. She was probably doing this after reading the behavioral patterns based on the names recorded in the electronic brain, Tatsuya thought as he moved before her.

"Before taking hold of this body, you guys appeared to function like a group towards a common objective. Within your group, was there an entity that served as a leader?"

((There is no one among us who functions in the capacity of a leader.))

"Then how do you maintain group cohesion?"

((Strictly speaking, all of us are not independent bodies. We are both individuals and the whole body. While we possess the ability to think critically, we also share our consciousness.))

"In other words, one mind exists in a state with multiple cognitive processes?"

((Not cognitive processes. I think it would be more appropriate to describe this as an incompletely independent cognitive process in the subconscious being gathered by a higher level of cognition.))

"I understand. However, in that case, if the subconscious has differing agendas, wouldn't the higher level lose cohesion?"

((Under the condition that the life form is set as the host, then it is impossible to completely avoid being influenced by the host's most fundamental desires. Our actions are determined when survival instincts and reproductive impulses reach an accord within the consciousness.))

"Life extension and producing more companions. Quite simple really for life forms seeking survival."

((Indeed. We will abide by the life form's greatest desire then proceed along with survival and reproducing as our goals.))

"Since there is a unified consensus within the group, does the group provide assistance for objectives that lie outside of survival and replication?"

((Despite achieving general consensus, we still possess individual sense of self that reciprocates the host's personal desires on our own. However, that is under the condition that the overall objective holds the priority, so I think it's just as Master believes.))

"I see……"

Tatsuya fell into a reverie after speaking.

One reason that she failed to interrupt him any further could be that she wasn't human in the first place, or the fact that her host was pure machinery.

"Then, the current you is something that exists outside of the general consensus, an almost heretical existence. If a dissent appeared in your group, wouldn't you be eliminated?"

((We do not have the desire to root out dissenters. However, once they determine that I may pose an obstacle to their objective, they may elect to launch a pre-emptive attack.))

"I see…… I have one other question. Right now, you said that you are cut off from contact with the rest of your comrades, but can you detect their presence?"

((That is possible if the target shows high activity. On the other hand, my current state is one such that they can also detect my presence if we're in the same area.))

"Is that so?"

Tatsuya fell into a thoughtful posture before immediately giving new orders.

"Pixie, return to the trailer, change into your original uniform and enter sleep mode. I will find you later."

((Understood. Executing standby orders.))

Pixie primly, or rather stiffly, bowed before moving towards the garage.

Tatsuya mentally selected the equipment he needed, returned home first, then went to the Student Council to pick up Miyuki.

In the year 2095, the world had grown smaller. However, the gap between Magicians and mundane humans was the exact opposite.

Magicians had received official recognition after early deployment and action in the scattered national territorial disputes and were heavily restricted from leaving the country except on government business. For Magicians, the world had shrunk to within the country's interior.

On the other hand, mundane humans could take full advantage of the advancements in transportation technology. Land, sea, and air travel had all become streamlined and more efficient, so people could freely travel internationally. Now, getting to the other side of the world was a simple matter of one quick flight in a matter of hours, removing the need to switch flights. Compared to one hundred years ago, the world had indeed become smaller.

After experiencing conflicts across the world, every country paid careful scrutiny to potential illegal immigrants who loitered within the country's borders for too long. In comparison, the current trend was that short stays from foreign travelers were on the rise. This was made blatantly obvious by the sight of foreigners walking along the streets of Tokyo.

On the eastern bank of the "river", no Japanese person would find it odd for young men of Spanish or mestizo ancestry walking with young women of equally mixed ethnicities at dusk. None of the citizens would have found it strange for the three of them to walk into the large, somewhat out of fashion hospital.

There were beds laid out in the hospital's basement.

Usually, this would be considered par for the course, but these beds usually wouldn't appear in a hospital.

The bedspring wrapped within the black leather was practically useless, so rather than calling this a bed, this was more like a long, rectangular box.

The various beds weren't arranged in one row or split into two rows of four or five, but a haphazard arrangement of all 9 beds. Atop each bed lay a young male, each with a face from East Asian descent. All nine of them had pale faces as they slept on beds with no pillows without a single chest rising or descending. They appeared to be corpses, or in a near death-like state. The basement only contained the 9 silent young men as well as the three men and women of mixed descent who just entered.

A white male stood in the gap formed by the beds set up with the head facing inwards. Standing in the darkness, he almost seemed like a necromancer.

The mestizo male checked his watch and raised an arm as if waiting for something. After approximately ten minutes, the man looked towards the young woman standing on the other side of the ring of beds. This appeared to be some sort of signal as the woman nodded and raised both hands before her face.

The man repeated the same motion. Between the man and woman who were facing one another, the white male clapped his hands while his footsteps emitted noise.

The clapping continued.

The steps continued as well.

The young man and the woman joined the white male in clapping while the sound of their pacing around the ring continued. As the young man and woman switched positions, the white male gave a louder clap.

Before the sound faded, the silent bodies rose from bed.

One body, then another.

Eight of those previously in a near death-like state had revived from their black beds.

In the darkness of the basement, there was the sound of an insect's wings flapping, except this existed in the mental landscape instead of the material world or the Idea.

If translated into a human language—

(I/We have finally reawakened.)

(My/Our numbers have decreased again.)

(Another person/one was lost?)

(Are there enough vessels?)

(Negative. The facilitator has procured them for us just as you see.)

(The Chinese spiritualists are quite capable.)

(Ho, at least they surpass my/our levels.)

(The desire for life on the cusp of death. The consciousness has been suspended.)

(But I/we have also learned from this. Now we know how to move from host to host.)

(Even if the vessel is destroyed next time, activities can still resume after a short delay.)

(It should be easy to replace the missing person/one.)

(Let's go reclaim my/our missing companion.)

(Let's find my/our companion.)

—This was the contents of that conversation. This was the conversation held between the three bodies who had come from overseas and the eight monsters who had reawakened from their slumber.

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After returning home, Tatsuya headed for the phone instead of changing first. Rather than using the telephone with the large screen in the living room, he used the secured line in his own room. Any power usually

reserved for external purposes was instead diverted to encryption on the phone that Tatsuya used to call Hayama, the butler for the Yotsuba Family. Right now, he was barely on time for the appointment he arranged ahead of time by mail.

"You're just on time, Tatsuya-dono."

"Hayama-san, many thanks for last evening."

Both sides skipped the small talk. Tatsuya was matching Hayama's tempo. Rather than saying the old butler was in a hurry because of his schedule, Tatsuya got the impression that the old man had something he wanted to say.

"As I said last night, there's no need to thank me. After all, protecting Miyuki-sama is the second highest priority for us in the Yotsuba Family."

"Hayama-san, hearing you say that so lightly puts me in a small quandary."

"There are no issues so long as the time frame and opponents are made clear. More importantly, I am different from that person in that I'm not brave enough to tangle with Tatsuya-dono."

He appeared to have enough time to engage in some small talk.

That being said, Tatsuya didn't have much time on his end. Though he had specifically requested a secure line, he still wanted to convey critical information as quickly as possible. –In addition, Tatsuya wasn't sure what he was going to do if Hayama brought up the conversation he had several months ago with Aoki.

"So, what did you need to talk to me about? You could not send this via mail nor was there time to meet in person, so I conclude that this information must be vital."

"Oh yes, that's right."

Hayama's voice sounded like he just remembered this. However, anyone could have noticed that this was nothing but theatrics based on the voice intonation alone even if they didn't know Hayama's personality.

"Tatsuya-dono, in regards to the monster incident, the 3rd Division will be mobilized. I just wanted to convey this to you."

"Third Division…… JSDF Intelligence Counterintelligence Department 3rd Division? I believe that interesting unit is affiliated with the Saegusa camp, correct?"

After Tatsuya said this, a chuckling sound could be heard over the receiver.

"I don't think they would want someone like you from the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion calling them interesting, but it is indeed that 3rd Division."

"My interests do not lie in the direction of eradicating the source. In other words, the Saegusa Family is using the 3rd Division to investigate the Parasite…… No, capture them instead?"

"Though I wanted to say that you are as sharp as always, but we are still unclear on their objective. Unfortunately, it is most likely aligned with what Tatsuya-dono just said."

How troublesome, Tatsuya thought from the bottom of his heart. This was originally a complicated incident with multiple factions already invested, now a new player had joined the fray. Furthermore, the Saegusa camp had a decidedly different perspective from Mayumi.

"Thank you very much for this valuable information."

Still, he was not allowed to just reset the board and try again. No matter how difficult it was, reality differed from games, and do overs were not an option.

"I felt that this was necessary after taking Miyuki-sama's safety into consideration. Please do not forget this, Tatsuya-dono."

"I will keep that in mind."

Indeed, they could not destroy the world that Miyuki lived in. Though there was no need for Hayama's extra reminder, Tatsuya accepted the comment without resistance.

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Seven o'clock in the evening.

All the students had long returned home, and the only lonely souls still occupying the school were a few of the faculty members. The school gates had been locked and, until the next day, access was strictly denied to all but a small group of exceptions. Teaching supplies, products for the campus store, and foodstuffs for the cafeteria were all largely brought through the back door to the underground passage before sundown.

The only ones allowed access were a handful of faculty members, security guards from a contracted security company, engineers working on maintenance that could only be done at night, individuals with special dispensation from the school, and select members from the Student Council.

This power that seemed a mite overkill even for student government was adopted last year while Mayumi was Student Council President. This was a huge help in that there was no longer a need to submit a request with valid reasons to the faculty. This was also especially useful for situations where the reasons could not be stated aloud.

Tatsuya had already made arrangements on the way home before he arrived there, and was now carrying the package that arrived at home on his back before heading for school. From the security guard at the door, he received 3 ID cards issued to visitors that only allowed night time access after a confirmation number from the Student Council was inputted. This was designed so that anyone not carrying a valid ID at night would trigger the security alarm as a suspicious individual.

As to why there were 3 cards, well, one of them was obviously for himself.

The second one was for Miyuki.

Miyuki received the ID card with a satisfied smile.

At first, Tatsuya never planned on bringing Miyuki along. The original plan called for Miyuki to watch the house.

Unfortunately, Miyuki added on a condition when issuing the night time access number.

She said she wanted to come along.

The power to issue access confirmation lay within the hands of Azusa, the Student Council President. However, just as the rumors went, the real power in the Student Council was the Vice President and not the

President. Approximately three hours ago, this was on full display in front of Tatsuya.

After failing to convince his stubborn little sister otherwise, Tatsuya was forced to acquiesce.

Miyuki, along with one other.

The third card was handed to Honoka, who met him at the station. This may not need to be said, but just as with Miyuki, no, even before Miyuki, Tatsuya never planned on bringing Honoka along. The reason everything turned out like this was because Honoka was also present when the question about the access confirmation came up in the Student Council Room. Indeed, he could only blame himself for being careless. On top of that, even if he could refuse her, he couldn't tell her the real reason with Azusa and Isori eavesdropping on them. He still might have been able to deny Honoka's request, but he could not go through with this after Miyuki threw in her support. Additionally, unlike Miyuki, Honoka received the ID card from Tatsuya with a petrified expression on her face.

The reason he requested the access card was to "investigate the odd behaviors in the 3H-P94 model". Nevertheless, the real reason Tatsuya wanted to bring Pixie outside was to bait the Parasites.

He knew something after questioning Pixie multiple times, and that was "the Parasites won't leave Pixie alone". Although this knowledge was nothing more than speculation, Tatsuya had confidence in that line of thinking. If the general consensus lost contact with a component, they should attempt to recover that piece. Tatsuya judged that in order to accomplish this, they had to make contact somehow.

He had no way of locating the Parasites, though he didn't need to do that actively. –Until yesterday, that is. Since Pixie had been possessed by the Parasite, he could not wash himself of the whole deal. There was a much bigger problem with handing over Pixie in that state, and when compared to all that, he wanted to wipe out the Parasites even more. He had originally planned on fighting the Parasites again, which was precisely the reason why he had asked to train with Yakumo. Pixie was nothing more than the impetus that changed a reactive stance to a more proactive one.

Tatsuya wasn't planning on taking out all the Parasites tonight. Still, he believed that if they could lure out one or two, then that would lead to clues regarding the rest of them.

After taking into account the danger involved with this course of action, Tatsuya probably should have decisively forbidden Miyuki and Honoka from accompanying him. In all likelihood, Tatsuya was probably numb to the "danger" of too many things.

While strategizing tonight's activities, he never planned on proceeding alone. Based on his experiences to this point and contemplating the necessity of this move, he petitioned Erika and Mikihiko for support. It was only thanks to their help that he was able to allow Miyuki, who was in the know, and Honoka, who was somewhat of a participant, to come along.

First High's school rules required students to wear their uniforms before or after class, but this restriction was lifted when visiting the campus at night. On the surface, this was because the ID card had a built in transmitter so there was no need to wear a uniform, but in reality, the underlying intent was to prevent students from wandering around on the streets after hours in their uniform.

This was a matter of risk avoidance – better to have less incidents than more incidents – for the school. Understanding this, Tatsuya complied with that wish and wore the same combat-use jacket he usually wore. Matching her brother, Miyuki wore a half coat, sweat pants, and a pair of high boots for mobility.

Yet, Honoka still wore her uniform underneath her jacket. This caused one to ponder if she was fully aware of what they were about to do tonight, but Tatsuya wouldn't be Tatsuya if he did something so blatant as expressing that thought aloud.

"Honoka, did you not go home today?"

Miyuki was the one who gently asked the question on her brother's mind.

"Eh? No, I did go home."

Honoka lived alone in a rented room that was much closer to school than the siblings' residence. It was fairly implausible for her to not have enough time to change.

"Is…… wearing a uniform, going to be a problem……?"

"Well, it's not going to be a problem…… But it might be a little inconvenient."

Though scolding words were to be avoided, they were planning on running into trouble tonight. Furthermore, Honoka seemed to have missed that memo.

If he knew this was going to happen, he should have explained more carefully, Tatsuya thought with a hint of regret.

"Onii-sama, would it be better for Honoka to first stop by her apartment?"

Miyuki wanted to dispel the glum atmosphere.

"We can wait for Honoka downstairs while she changes."

Miyuki probably wasn't doing this to "help her rival". Most likely, she was presenting a solution to Tatsuya's puzzlement.

"That's true. It's too late for us to visit…… If Honoka is OK with it, let's go."

"Of course not! I, uh, would never mind if you came to visit. If you have time, please drop by."

However, while completely unrelated to Miyuki's thoughts, this was something that Honoka dearly wished for.

And so, while this drama was playing out, the three of them arrived at the garage for the Robotics Club. The door was locked of course, but things like locks were designed to be easily disabled from within.

Tatsuya pulled out his portable terminal and engaged short range communications before sending out a recognition signal that he prepared ahead of time. The response was practically immediate.

((Did you call for me, Master?))

A simple door's thickness, even a heavily reinforced armored door that was completely out of place on this flimsy looking exterior, was not going to affect telepathy.

"Open the door for me."

((Understood.))

Immediately after the response, the door to the garage opened.

Not far inside, the silhouette of a doll wearing a maid uniform dropped into a deep curtsey. Even with a monster dwelling inside, the basic behavioral modules were still active.

Once Pixie raised her head, Tatsuya removed the first thing from the bag.

"Pixie, put this on."

Even if it was late at night, no, on some level precisely because it was late at night, there was no way they could bring her around like this (in her maid getup). Whatever the case, any reason for wearing a maid uniform was no good. For this operation, Tatsuya first had to prepare a set of clothing for Pixie.

It appeared that orders of this extent did not require a verbal response.

All of a sudden, Pixie began removing her dress.

Tatsuya treated this entire process as if it was all a matter of course. This was already the second time he had seen "her" changing clothes after school, and since he had no interest in treating humans and dolls in the same light, to him Pixie changing clothes was the same thing as lifting the hood on an automatic car.

"Onii-sama? Why are you just watching!?"

However, it appeared that it was a little difficult for Miyuki to come around to his line of thinking.

Likewise, Honoka seemed to share that sentiment based on her disapproving gaze.

"What are you talking about, Miyuki? Pixie is a robot."

"A robot that happens to be a girl!"

"No, humanoid actually, and not precise enough to emulate the human body……"

Just as Tatsuya said, the 3H was designed to be a humanoid robot "indistinguishable from human beings after putting on clothes", but the portions and lines hidden beneath the clothes could not possibly compare with a human female. The "parts" on a doll used for deviant purposes would be a little more pronounced.

The torso gave the impression of "a woman wearing a skin-colored leotard", but that only extended to the waist. The portion from the waist to the leg showed lines that clearly belonged on a robot, and even wearing tights over that could not hide the fact she wasn't human. That was the reason why the disguise involved a long dress.

Still, for the two young ladies, subjectivity trumped objectivity.

Miyuki forcibly turned Tatsuya around while Honoka stood protectively between Pixie and the other two.

Though he felt that this was a little ridiculous, it wasn't like he wanted to peep. Until the moment the two of them gave the OK, Tatsuya obediently kept his back to them.

"Tatsuya, it's OK now."

Despite Honoka's words, Tatsuya checked Miyuki's expression just in case before turning around.

The clothes that Tatsuya brought included a standard windbreaker jacket with high elasticity as well as a knee length skirt that covered the lines.

A scarf was wrapped twice around her neck.

A hat to cover the facial features was not provided on purpose.

The legs were wrapped in a thick pair of leggings and boots, which served to hide the fine details while improving the purchase on the feet. –These were all suggestions he took from the female officer responsible for clothing in the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

Honoka produced a brush out of nowhere and started organizing Pixie's hair. Pixie didn't seem to care in the slightest as she stood there without moving. This was declaring that, no matter how she looked on the outside, she was just a doll and not a human. Tatsuya did not have such high demands from Pixie.

As long as she could move about on the streets without suspicion, that was more than sufficient.

On that point, Pixie's current appearance was passable.

"Pixie, follow me."

As if declaring the onset of hostilities, Tatsuya made this declaration

He gave a lofty order as if commanding a slave.

Completely apathetic.

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Erika stood in front of her brother's room in a daze.

For her, this was unexpected beyond the unexpected. She couldn't believe she was still so weak in some areas.

Although she wasn't nervous when coming to her mother's house, she still tried her utmost to avoid her father and older sister. There was no conflict with those two, but she also wanted to dodge her oldest brother. Thankfully, her eldest brother shouldn't have returned at this hour yet.

At any rate, quickly handling the issue and then retreating far away from here to her own room was the best bet, so stalling in the hallways was the worst possible choice.

"Second brother, it's me, Erika."

She encouraged herself to strike up a conversation.

"Come in."

There was a tiny delay before a response was heard.

The sound was neither displeased nor welcoming.

Instead, the unpleasant aura must already have been retracted.

Striking down the urge to do an "about face", Erika opened the door.

"What is it, coming here at this hour?"

Naotsugu sat in a chair at the writing table. He turned in his chair and faced his upper body towards Erika. However, Erika noticed that the bed behind the writing table showed signs of someone just in bed recently.

Although this was the opposite situation from last night, Erika didn't open her mouth to scold him.

"There's just a few things I wanted to talk to you about."

Erika's tone was slightly hesitant.

Her change was brought about by the forced smile that floated across Naotsugu's face.

"Go ahead."

Naotsugu's response was a little half-hearted, almost as if it was like "I'll listen just because it's you". Yet, this didn't lessen Erika's load in the slightest, since something else seemed to be on his mind.

"Onii-san, have you heard of a unit called the 101st Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion?"

"Why do you know that name, Erika?"

Erika was a little hurt by Naotsugu's nonchalant attitude and rallied to utter those words, words that immediately captured all of Naotsugu's attention.

"Actually……"

Once she got here, Erika was again filled with doubt, but there was no other way to go about it.

"The person Onii-san was protecting is actually my classmate, Shiba Tatsuya-kun. He happens to be one of the soldiers for the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion."

"What did you just say……?"

Erika was trembling with hesitation, if not outright fear, as she said this, to which Naotsugu was unable to hide his shock.

"I'm terribly sorry. Originally, I should have passed this along several days ago when you asked, but because of someone called Major Kazama, I was unable to do so because of a gag order related to classified national security reasons."

"Major Kazama……? –As in 'Daitengu' Kazama Harunobu!?"

"Daitengu?"

This time it was Erika's turn to tilt her head in surprise at her brother's words.

For the appropriate Magician, and also to overawe their opponents by bolstering their name, sometimes an exaggerated alias was called for, but "Daitengu" was too unique even for that. It was so overblown that it seemed impossible.

"Does Onii-san know about Major Kazama?"

"Yeah…… In forests or mountainous terrain, he is globally acknowledged to be one of the finest Ancient Magic users. Likewise in the realm of paratroopers, he is still renowned as one of the great commanders in the country."

Naotsugu's expression and voice were interlaced with excitement and awe.

"Do you know about the Vietnamese Conflict? In that war, the South Vietnamese Army that was trying to wage guerilla warfare against the Great Asian Alliance that was encroaching into the Indian Peninsula and the Korean army dispatched by the Great Asian Alliance were so fearful of him that they treated him like Death or the Devil himself."

Upon hearing her brother's words, Erika knew that he had forgotten everything in front of him and merely sighed as if to say "What am I going to do with you……"

Many were those who martyred themselves on the path to glory by going that extra mile. Maybe one day, this sort of thinking will drive this country to destruction. Even though this wasn't something that a young woman like her should consider, Erika couldn't help but ponder this in her head.

"Rumor has it that the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion is under Major Kazama's direct command…… In that light, all of these rumors that smack of urban legends make sense. Furthermore, if Shiba Tatsuya-kun is a member of that outfit, then that power unbefitting his age could also be explained."

Just as Erika seemed to be lost in her own world, Naotsugu also appeared to be talking to himself.

Thanks to this, Erika's attention was drawn back to her original goal.

"Onii-san, I made contact with Major Kazama during the Yokohama Incident. If not for that emergency, I may not have been able to stumble across Shiba-kun's secret. Even then, I felt that this was a huge secret."

"Hm~…… The Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion carries all the characteristics of black ops. Having a high school student join them as an irregular must contain a very special reason."

"I broke regulations by informing Onii-san about Shiba-kun's situation, so please keep that in mind."

"In other words, Erika is telling me to stop poking into his affairs, correct?"

"Indeed. The fallout from poking that hornet's nest should be something that not only Onii-san, but the Chiba Family as a whole would want to avoid. Likewise, that nest may contain a giant swarm of poisonous hornets."

"Hm…… That's true, you have a point there, Erika. However, although he's a student, I belong to the army. I cannot disobey a direct order."

"Then, can you pretend to obey orders? If you pretend to be his guard, then under situations where he gets attacked, you can then appear and seize control of the situation."

"I see…… I understand. Then let's proceed along these lines."

……Fortunately, she was able to convince her brother without dropping the name "Yotsuba". Concealing her uneasy expression, Erika bowed and left Naotsugu's room without catching his eye.

After returning to her own room, Erika read the message that was flashing on the information terminal atop her desk before murmuring "Aoyama Cemetery, eh?" She didn't sit in the chair directly and immediately peeled off her clothes and threw them aside. This was not something a young lady should be doing, but she was also taking this opportunity to get rid of the depression she felt while trying to convince Naotsugu.

After putting on the composite rubber under armor with bulletproof, anti-piercing and other qualities, she put on a leather biker jacket and shorts. She wore protectors that did not disrupt her mobility over her knees and pulled a pair of clothes over her hands that had thin, composite fibers over the palm and finger areas. After verifying the contents in her jacket

pocket, Erika picked up her weapons and headed for the threshold. The shorts and long rubber boots appearance highly suited her fiery appearance, but her destination wasn't the night life.

Not far from her, "Erika's personal guard" awaited her. In this recent "vampire incident", they were the core elements of the Chiba Family's personnel and served as Erika's hands and feet in this operation.

"Come."

Erika coldly uttered those words.

Yet no trace of displeasure was shown by the men as they followed in her footsteps.

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Honoka's place was a single person apartment for rent. The total area was supposed to be 1 LDK, but with a small dining area in the kitchen, the total area was less than 1 LDK.

Even with the living room and bedroom separated from one another, this was something that was absolutely required for young girls. Even if the boy was Tatsuya, she wasn't willing for someone to open the door and immediately get a glimpse of her bedroom.

In the living room, Tatsuya was enjoying tea with Miyuki. Pixie had been halted from executing her routine behavioral pattern when Honoka frantically prepared tea in time.

The coarse tea that was brought out was likely Honoka's personal favorite.

Honoka herself was changing in her room. The soundproofing was excellent, but for some reason, there appeared to be some sort of nervous aura emanating from Honoka's side. Of course, the siblings knew that feigning obliviousness here was what propriety demanded.

When they finally caught sight of Honoka, the siblings just finished the tea.

"Sorry for the wait!"

Full of vigor, Honoka appeared dressed in the pretty much the same fashion as Miyuki.

Her upper body was covered by a large half coat. Beneath the jacket, a sweater with a high collar could be seen. However, the bottom half was not covered by sweats but a combination of mini-dress and thick-soled shoes. Her skirt had a circular hem and her shoes were the type that revealed her ankles due to the heels.

The skirt's length was perfectly covered by the large half coat, which gave the impression that she wasn't wearing anything under the coat.

This was a getup that was sure to draw attention – rather, this was a getup that was supposed to catch the eyes of boys.

Still, it wasn't without any practicality. Honoka's leggings retained heat very well and the fabric was woven with fibers that improved durability. Tatsuya knew that the same type of fibers were used for jackets deployed in combat operations. After examining her from head to toe, he nodded lightly.

"Well then, let's be off."

There was no way to tell how Honoka interpreted Tatsuya's nodding motion, but her smile was fit to melt as she tagged along behind him.

In her hair, she wore the pair of crystals Tatsuya brought her. Both Tatsuya and Miyuki as well as Honoka herself missed the brief instance where Pixie was drawn to that flash of light.

"Onii-sama, where are we off to now?"

After getting their tickets and boarding the escalator to the station, Miyuki posed this question to Tatsuya after seeing that no one was about. Miyuki would follow him regardless of where their destination was, but that did not mean she cared not where they were going.

"Aoyama Cemetery."

Honoka was the same in terms of interest, but her face paled at Tatsuya's response. Taking the hour into consideration, favor and trust were two different things, but there was nothing to be done. Only a decidedly small

minority among young ladies would be able to emulate Miyuki's ability to not bat an eyelid.

"A test of courage in the wrong season…… could not possibly be the reason. Is it something like ghosts or demons will appear there?"

"How astute of you."

Though carefully controlled, Tatsuya seemed to be slightly pleased after confirming his sister's speculation.

"Naturally. That's because it's something Onii-sama is thinking about."

In excellent spirits, Miyuki replied back with a smile.

This pricked something in the depths of Honoka's heart.

"Um, Tatsuya, isn't the place closed at this time……?"

Two days ago, she might have endured the pain and wilted.

However, from that evening two days ago, her close friend's powerful encouragement reverberated in Honoka's consciousness, no, her heart.

Standing on the higher step of the escalator, Honoka interjected herself into the conversation.

Miyuki wore an "Ara?" expression, but Tatsuya seemed unruffled.

"We should be able to enter, though it's not like we would be hampered even if we could not enter. So long as we get close, they should come out and meet us. That's the reason we brought Pixie along."

The results of Pixie's interrogation told Tatsuya that the other Parasites were unlikely to accept her current existence.

For life forms that synchronized with other creatures, a Pixie who had lost the drive for reproduction was something to be eliminated.

Since their numbers were so few, they should attempt to retrieve her from that mechanical prison. Once the two fundamental impulses like self-defense and species preservation kicked in, their plan of action should be quite similar to humans.

"Even if we're about to get caught, I'm sure Honoka would do something, right?"

Her "Optical Camouflage" ability was not mere rumors but something that Tatsuya had personally witnessed. Tatsuya also knew that this was a powerful, high level technique that was far beyond the USNA military's support personnel to imitate with their "Dark Curtain". Honoka was a Magician who could entirely shroud her presence.

That being said, this was just a turn of the phrase for Tatsuya. In reality, Tatsuya never considered the possibility that they would be forced to obscure themselves.

However.

Tatsuya also didn't fully comprehend something else.

Honoka was going to take that joke of his completely seriously.

"Leave it to me."

Thanks to the titanic misunderstanding Tatsuya created, Honoka was now completely fired up and bursting with confidence as she replied back in a warm tone while patting her chest.

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Located underground beneath a medium-sized building within a corner of Ichigaya, the JSDF Intelligence 3rd Division set up their headquarters.

If the main office located in the Department of Defense was a façade for the central headquarters for the JSDF's intelligence work, then this "basement" was undeniably one of the central headquarters hiding behind that mask. Since this was central headquarters, referring to it as "one of the" seemed a little odd, but this was the product of risk management to prevent a crisis like "being paralyzed with the fall of headquarters" from occurring.

Of course, this caused several serious side effects that came with the territory with being an irregular organization and left great flaws.

It was only natural for an intelligence organization to have a side where "the right hand has no idea what the left hand is doing", but this was

incredibly blatant here. Lacking initiative was still excusable, but with each department having their own patron, it was also true that each followed their own special interests to the point of disunity.

The JSDF intelligence divisions contained major unity issues.

"The observation target is moving towards the center of the city. Target is accompanied by the sister and two others."

The sponsor of this basement came from one of the primary financial groups in the field of electronics manufacturing and at the same time was the second largest military supplier in the country. Furthermore, this group was deeply entwined with the Saegusa Family, to the point that the statement could be made that the real patron of the 3rd Division was actually the Saegusa Family. Currently, they were following the will of the head of the Saegusa Family and not in concert with the Saegusa and Juumonji Alliance spearheaded by Mayumi and company.

"Comparing images on file…… One of them is a Year 1 student at the National Magic University Affiliated First High, Mitsui Honoka."

"Classmate, eh. What an odd interest, bringing the sister along on a date."

The tone that belonged to the man who appeared to be in charge sounded mocking, but from a different perspective, it may have also sounded a little biased.

"The other person is….. No, not a human. Looks to be a Humanoid Home Helper from the P94 series."

"A HAR model? Where do they plan on going with that in tow? Have we gotten into the vehicle's guidance system?"

"Sir, the protection is very stout…… My deepest apologies!"

In response to his subordinate's practically tearful reply, the one in command did not issue any more reprimands. He understood very well that if the public transportation system could be so easily hacked, then terrorism would run rampant in the streets.

"Chief, the vehicle that the target is on board has changed direction."

"Akasaka…… No, Aoyama?"

The chief murmured as he watched the monitor display the estimated destination for the aforementioned vehicle before issuing new orders.

"Dispatch agents disguised as police to the Aoyama Tunnel. Fake an arrest on charges of the target using magic and capture them."

Amid the replies of the order being acknowledged and being transferred to various receivers, the chief continued to observe the monitor.

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Colonel Virginia was stretched out in exhaustion in the rented apartment (more like condominium) fully equipped with furniture that the embassy rented for extended stays.

Though it was only a temporary command center, they had still been breached. In addition, even though the battle had not concluded with a kidnapping, they still put on a shameful display of being left adrift until another nation's vessel rescued them. This was a huge blow against her record and future career.

Surprisingly, the officers from the homeland stationed at the embassy failed to blame her. This disgrace extended far beyond her alone and included the special forces dispatched as guards for the temporary command center and the navy belonging to the seized vessel (for that matter, the USNA navy's pride suffered an even more grievous blow than she did), so she knew that it was impossible for them to blame her.

However, even beyond that, she still had the energy for further rumination.

Yet, she was unable to deny that they had suffered a huge defeat.

It was only after she raised her head at the unexpected ringing of the speaker phone that she noticed it was late into the night.

She even heard the female officer on guard duty answer the phone.

Virginia's ears detected a sharp intake of breath from the female officer.

"Excuse me."

The footsteps that approached the room she occupied as well as the voice that requested permission to enter had both been knocked askew out of shock.

"Come in."

Virginia adjusted her posture and mentally reminded herself to speak clearly. She could not allow her subordinates to witness her weakened state – her brand of leadership involved not investing additional interpretations and emotions.

The door to the room was carefully opened. A tall young woman in full uniform saluted before her eyes. Her guard was selected for martial prowess over appearance or official record and possessed superlative ability and courage. Indeed, Virginia rated her highly enough that she believed that last night's outcome might have been different had she been present at her side.

Nonetheless – she currently stood there stiffly and pale-faced.

Feeling that something was awry, Virginia rose from the sofa.

"What is it?"

"Someone has requested to meet you face to face, Colonel."

"What……?"

Virginia residing at this location was highly classified. If someone from the military (from the USNA military) came to see her, her guard wouldn't be so flustered. Likewise for anyone from the embassy. In other words, the visitor had broken through the USNA military's information lockdown and was an outsider who knew that she was here and requested an audience.

Unwilling to even issue orders to her sergeant, Virginia manipulated the remote herself to put on the display from the main living room.

The image that was reflected contained a poor young girl wearing elegant lace with a curious expression on her face.

This utterly astounding sight caused Virginia to freeze for a solid 5 seconds.

"……Who the heck is that?"

Virginia finally rebooted her consciousness and detected the two sturdy men standing behind the young girl. One of them carefully carried what must be the young girl's coat. This showed that they were either serving her or were her guardians.

The person that these people, who were clearly not ordinary plebeians, were guarding was most likely that young girl of a tender age.

Despite knowing that she should be on guard, Virginia could feel her sense of reality being eroded.

"Her name is Ayako Kuroba."

The sergeant spoke. Even Virginia could not fault her gulping motion after hearing the next few words.

"She claims to be an emissary from the Yotsuba Family."

"How wonderful it is to meet you, Ms. Virginia. My name is Ayako Kuroba. Pardon my intrusion, but today I come on behalf of the Yotsuba Family."

The young girl greeted Virginia in fluent English.

However, she discarded any military references to superior officers.

Given her perfect grasp of the English language, it was impossible to believe that she was unfamiliar with those terms.

In short, this was intentional.

Broadcasting her own name and surname was likely also intentional.

"I am Colonel Virginia Barans, USNA Military Joint Chiefs of Staff. Excuse my rudeness, but I wanted to ask something prior to our conversation."

"Ara, what is it? I will answer if I am able."

She was likely younger than Major Sirius, but this young girl far outstripped her at the negotiation table.

Though still immature, she was still superior to the USNA Military High Commander with all of her experiences.

This was no simple girl before her eyes. Virginia carefully engraved that in her heart.

"You said Yotsuba Family…… Are you referring to that Yotsuba?"

She spoke in an abstract function just in case that there was an error.

However, in regards to this vague line of questioning, the young girl laughed merrily.

"Indeed, that Yotsuba. Today, I come on behalf of Yotsuba Maya, head of the Yotsuba among the Ten Master Clans with a request."

Even though she was mentally prepared that this wasn't a mistake, simply accepting such a boldly stated truth was no easy task.

The Yotsuba of Japan.

For those who walked with magic, this was the untouchable land. Especially for people who wielded magic for military purposes.

They were not like Major Sirius in that one person bore the absolute destructive might to challenge an army.

The existence of the Yotsuba Family lay in the entirely opposite direction.

Right now (at least for now), they were subservient to the Japanese government, but if they suddenly morphed into terrorists, they were held as individuals who could pull the trigger on World War IV.

On the magic side, for such a zealous organization, they were not raised up as something worthy of respect, but of complete and utter fear.

"Request, is it?"

"Indeed. I sincerely hope that you will hear me out."

"What is it?"

It was only now that Virginia noticed that they had not served tea.

However, this was far too late to offer refreshments.

Virginia concentrated all of her focus on what the young girl was about to say.

"Then please excuse me. We would like to use Ms. Virginia's hand to halt the interference with our country's Magicians."

"……"

There was no need to say this, but interference referred to the clandestine operation she was in command of. The investigation and protection (in short, abduction) of Japan's undisclosed Strategic-class Magician as well as his or her nullification (assassination). Of course, she had anticipated this girl's "request" – the Yotsuba's demand. In essence, this was the most likely outcome.

Yet, to hear someone utter a phrase far coarser than "please stop" in their request temporarily robbed her of the ability to respond.

"Ms. Virginia, you appear to be someone who understands what sort of system my country's 'Ten Master Clans' is."

To put it plainly, if you don't know then I will tell you. Irked by that tone, Virginia nodded her head at the same time. There was no point in playing dumb.

"Our head, Yotsuba Maya, dislikes your meddling. Your country and mine are allies, and neither wishes to sow the seeds of war."

"……Is that a threat? You will open fire if we do not stop?"

Ayako neglected to reply to Virginia's query and once again laughed merrily.

"Ms. Virginia, was last night restful?"

"So you were the ones who did that!?"

By the time she caught herself, Virginia had already risen from the sofa and leaned forward.

If the table was any smaller, she might have already seized the young girl's collar.

"What are you referring to? I only asked because I thought that your complexion was a little unhealthy, that's all."

Though her words were out of concern, no trace of that emotion could be detected on her features.

The young girl continued to smile. She made no attempt to hide the face that signified she had complete confidence that she knew everything.

"Ms. Virginia, please calm down. If possible, we would like to form a friendly relationship with you, Ms. Virginia."

"You dare to say a friendly relationship……?"

Maybe it was only because the young girl voiced it aloud, but Virginia realized that capturing her now at this point in time would pose no benefit whatsoever. This only served to infuriate Virginia further as she sat back down.

"Ms. Virginia is well aware of the Yotsuba's power. Likewise, we too understand Ms. Virginia's power very well."

Her emotions were about as dark as possible, but logic commanded Virginia to listen to the young girl's words.

The young girl who claimed to speak on behalf of the head of the Yotsuba was not talking about the USNA military's strength or the might of Stars, but saying she knew about Virginia's power.

That meant……

"Our head said that if Ms. Virginia can arrange for this incident to end here, we will never forget this personal favor that you have bestowed on us. Also, our head said that should there be an opportunity in the future, we would like to lend Ms. Virginia a hand as well."

This was certainly a tempting offer.

If she was on personal terms with the "Yotsuba", then she would have more than enough to reclaim her lost position in the military and then some. She had personally tested their prowess the night before.

As usual, the young girl maintained her smile.

After weighing both sides on a scale, logic won. –The side of logic named ambition.

Colonel Virginia, faced with a devil's contract in the form of a beautiful young girl, decided to sign.

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Along the way from Aoyama Station to the street side walkway, Tatsuya felt the eyes fastidiously observing him the entire time. Furthermore, it wasn't just one or two. Based on his conversation with Hayama before leaving the house, Tatsuya had already predicted that he was going to be under observation. That being said, the amount of personnel heartily invested into this venture surpassed his expectations.

They might be aware of the siblings' connection to the Yotsuba Family or were merely in the guessing phase, but it was also possible that this large force was deployed to ward against the Yotsuba Family intervening.

In the end, even with the support of the Saegusa Family, Tatsuya did not believe that this national intelligence group would dare incur the wrath of the Yotsuba Family directly.

So they don't care about the Yotsuba Family…… Internal Affairs, Public Safety, and the Intelligence Department should have been aware of the incident that embroiled the siblings' mother and aunt in their youth. Completely uncaring of the fact that they could be drawn into a rampage of revenge heedless of the target, it was utterly incredible that they could have forgotten such a harsh reminder in the last 20 to 30 years. Not to mention that the might of the Yotsuba Family – "might" that hinted at influence but was more along the lines of violence – was far greater now than it was in the past.

Tatsuya curtailed his train of thought there. New eyes were added to the mix that were observing him.

New, alien, eyes.

Those were the gazes that came from inhuman, monstrous eyes.

For professional intelligence officers, being ordered to observe three high school students and a single HAR model certainly deflated those receiving the orders, but they still went along with it believing that there was no other recourse.

With the experience underneath their belt, they also had a side where they were increasingly going easy on the target. There were a few among them who always gave it their all under any circumstance and never let down their guard while diligently handling their task, but despite the similarities between going easy and sloth, they were fundamentally different.

While going easy bears a somewhat negative impression, this was also a matter of pacing oneself. There was no need to invest all 100% when a mere 50% could get the job done.

Compared to the usual 100%, this mission's difficulty only required 50% of their power to accomplish, so they only used 50%. Though they might be a little slow off the draw in the beginning, in the end, they still managed to accomplish more things. "Habit" was also an ability.

However, it was also true that there were advantages as well as disadvantages.

For the elite intelligence agents masquerading as police officers, shadowing and observation were their most common tasks. They relied on their bountiful experience to selectively focus their attention, hereby creating an opening.

The mission they received was to immediately fake an arrest when the observation target used magic and thus subdue and abduct them.

For this, they were issued measuring devices to detect magic.

However, the change on the device only occurred directly after a cry of alarm put everyone on guard.

—The men's vision was assailed by a tide of flashing lights.

A thoroughly unexpected pre-emptive strike.

A hostile act utterly without precursor.

Their will to retaliate was submerged beneath the roiling waves of those flashing lights.

"Tatsuya-kun, I have caused the people observing us to fall asleep."

"Good work."

Seeing an elated Honoka report her accomplishment, even Tatsuya found it hard to prevent his face from becoming overly stiff.

The alien gazes were drawing closer. Inhuman…… No doubt about it, it was the Parasite. With them as opponents, human observers were too great a hassle.

Using magic at will on the open streets was illegal in the first place. Anyone who eyed someone else with such dogged persistence could not possibly be the average civilian or real public servants, which only compounded the difficulty because their usage of magic was not authorized. The reason why Tatsuya communicated the location of the observers to his companions was to warn them against using magic haphazardly prior to shaking off their pursuers.

In truth, Tatsuya was going to say it aloud.

Compared to that, however, Honoka's actions outstripped him in speed.

"Even if we're about to get caught, I'm sure Honoka would do something, right?"

Honoka had made a rather broad interpretation to Tatsuya's phrase. In reality, her heart fairly sang that "This is the first time Tatsuya is asking my assistance!"

Since there was always a side of her that tended to daydream, neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki objected to this, but it was even greater today than usual.

As a Magician, Light-based magic was Honoka's specialty. She was particularly adept at manipulating light.

After inquiring the observers' location from Tatsuya, she used the magnification of light refraction to verify this before suddenly unleashing a brilliant flare of light before her opponents' eyes.

Brainwashing magic, the light of "Evil Eye".

When Tatsuya noticed this, he was seriously getting worried.

Since he had hinted for her to simply "let them sleep", Tatsuya had allowed her to activate her magic, though to be brutally honest, he wasn't confident that this was the right decision. Magic that contained hypnotic effects was judged to be the same level as magic that brought direct harm to the physical body and was considered to be an innately vicious magic.

If they had been caught by real policemen, then they wouldn't just be let off with a warning. Adolescence would not spare them from real punishment – something along the lines of "using magic for community service".

The magic she used was the same as the leader from the "Blanche" terrorists, but both her speed and accuracy far surpassed him though she had executed it against 4 different people.

Being capable of using "Evil Eye" was something praiseworthy, but Tatsuya immediately felt that they needed to relocate quickly.

"Let's get out of here before their companions arrive."

As expected, bringing Honoka along was a complete disaster…… Finally realizing this, Tatsuya quietly informed his other companion.

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"What a troublesome young lady……"

As she watched the monitor for the observation system along the streets – primarily composed of street cameras, there were also devices to detect poisonous gases, illegal high efficiency electric waves and the psion detectors for unauthorized usage of magic, Fujibayashi couldn't help but sigh.

"That's still a wonderful technique. If I recall correctly, she is called 'Mitsui Honoka', correct?"

The voice that came from behind her spoke solely on the meritorious value of a Magician.

In regards to her grandfather's words that bore no ulterior meaning, Fujibayashi sighed again.

"That's true, Sofu-sama. She is a Year 1 student from First High, Mitsui Honoka."

"Could the 'Mitsui' who excel in that system of magic belong to the bloodline that carries the Element of Light?"

"That remains unknown. Should I investigate?"

"Oh hardly, there's no need to investigate specifically for that reason."

When asked by his granddaughter, Elder Kudou chuckled happily and shook his head.

"Speaking of which…… Though the outstanding individuals have been called outstanding and the unique have been labeled unique, he certainly has a group of fascinating people gathered around him."

"Not just on abilities alone. There are quite a few children with interesting personalities as well."

Casually throwing out those insulting words, Fujibayashi slipped on a pair of thin gloves for calculation purposes before her fingers came into contact with the touchscreen and danced over the controls.

The observation system was stubborn in both software and hardware, but in comparison, operation was a piece of cake. Unrestricted recordings could easily be taken advantage of by malicious individuals or those lurking in the depths of the government. Once restricted to being operated by hand, such a ponderous observation system would be too difficult to manipulate.

Including this vampire incident, in order to be above blame for any use of magic, a few actions were required to ensure that select portions of the data were not left for the Saegusa and Chiba Families.

Mayumi was responsible for the leading information control, but with the exams coming up, her task was delegated to Fujibayashi.

However, Fujibayashi's approach was to exclude all others and operate the controls herself. Unlike Mayumi, Fujibayashi was also working to hide the fact that the daughter of the Saegusa Family's head was being used as a cat's paw, since she knew that the head was secretly observing all of this behind his daughter's back. Knowing the reason for it, there was no way she could leave this task to others.

Since she was not operating as a hacker and as a legitimate operator of the system, this was easier on her than usual, but at the same time she felt a little out of whack behind the controls.

Still, there was nothing she could do about that.

Since she was figuratively being relied upon and realistically doing her duty, she could go about it as she pleased like she typically would.

Not to mention the fact that her grandfather was right behind her.

Both she and the one who sent her (in other words, the one who planned for her substitution) were not expecting Elder Kudou to be observing here.

As to why he was here, Fujibayashi wasn't going to ask that.

Though he was her grandfather, they were not that close. As a member from the Fujibayashi Family, she had taken heed not to express any close relationship with the elder of the Kudou Family.

In addition, if sparks did fly between the Saegusa and Yotsuba Families, it would be unsurprising for Kudou Retsu to act and put out the flames.

Fujibayashi Kyouko's grandfather was one of the few privy to Shiba Tatsuya's real identity.

"Should I say birds of a feather flock together…… Or maybe cut from the same cloth. Regardless, he is definitely a star who is a far cry from being normal."

"Indeed. Looks like the manipulated might actually turn out to be the manipulator."

Fujibayashi joined in as she continued to watch the monitor.

If she turned to see her grandfather's face, then she might have noticed the deeper meaning behind his words.

However, she failed to do so.

Birds of a feather. Centered round the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion headed by Kazama, she was also included among that number. Nevertheless, whether fortunate or unfortunate, her grandfather's message was not passed along to the granddaughter.

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Just as they expected, they could not enter Aoyama Cemetery.

Still, there was no need to do so.

Along the high wall built after the war (a tactic employed against disrespectful people snapping pictures of the dead), the three fashionable(?) youngsters and one machine were taking a walk at night when they detected auras approaching from the front and back.

((Master, three "Parasites" are coming.))

Tatsuya stopped upon hearing Pixie's telepathy.

The reason why they used telepathy instead of the body's speakers was to draw in the Parasites.

He had also ordered Pixie to telepathically communicate with Miyuki and Honoka.

At pretty much the same time Tatsuya halted, the two girls also came to a stop and drew near Tatsuya's sides.

Though the two of them were unafraid, their faces betrayed their unease.

Tatsuya himself was not immune to anxiety, so he was not displeased with their attitude.

As prearranged, Tatsuya pressed the button on his terminal that activated the beacon. Through the GPS, he located his position and passed it along to Erika and Mikihiko. Immediately, they would hasten towards there with the members of the Chiba Family in tow. Once they had prepared their ambush as planned, they would start capturing the Parasites.

Still, based on their opponents' situation, Tatsuya was figuring on waiting for reinforcements.

Tatsuya pulled his favored silver machine from a pocket on the left side. His right hand carried the pistol-shaped Specialized CAD "Trident" as he naturally allowed his hands to drift downwards, waiting for humans possessed by demons to approach.

As if protecting Tatsuya's back, Miyuki stood there with her back to him and a terminal-shaped CAD in her hand. Pressing her right hand to the bracelet-shaped CAD worn on her left hand, Honoka stood at Tatsuya's side as she altered between looking forward and back.

Seeing these trustworthy silhouettes around him, Tatsuya unconsciously smiled.

In a thoroughly unexpected area, his anxiety eased.

The source of his anxiety was that he was worried about putting these two girls in danger.

Once he realized that there was nothing to worry about for these two, his anxiety dissipated.

Settling himself, he directed his gaze toward the area illuminated by the street lights.

Three figures walked towards them. Their footsteps were free of hesitation. Just as Pixie had said, the Parasites appeared to have found Pixie's location.

Neither side fired the first shot as both sides shrank the distance between them even further.

When they came within range of identifying their clothing, two of the Parasites came to a halt.

The last remaining one continued to plod forward towards Tatsuya.

As their features became less murky, the sense of awkwardness grew steadily.

The source of this awkwardness was swiftly unraveled.

That was because the information presented by the eyes was different from the information relayed by the skin.

He wore a plain windbreaker coat and striped pants. The coat was unable to hide the physique and the face was not covered. Eyes, mouth, ears, hands, and feet all did not exceed normal parameters. Despite being plainly human in appearance, there was no aura of humanity. So this was what a demonic aura truly was.

As Tatsuya carefully scrutinized the target, the gap between him and Parasite continued to close, until they were close enough to hear each other's voice and see each other's expression.

"Shiba Tatsuya, we need to speak with you."

Since Tatsuya was not planning on speaking, it was within his scenario for the other side to initiate communications. This was a stable situation for a conversation (wording was another problem altogether), so everything was still within expected boundaries.

Still, the other side calling out his name came as somewhat of a shock.

"What should I refer to you as?"

In reply, this was how Tatsuya responded.

No words came from the open mouth belonging to the man possessed by the Parasite. This sort of blank staring was actually quite human-like, Tatsuya thought. The personality may have been taken over, but the emotional base remained unaltered.

Maybe, using the term taken over may be erroneous. Based on the information he got from Pixie, Parasites only carried the original consciousness. Put another way, this was as far as their emotions could develop. It was possible that the Parasite's sense of self had not taken over the human host, but had merged with the human to create a new personality. Tatsuya renewed his own understanding.

"Marte."

In regards to the contemplative Tatsuya, the Parasite gave this concise answer. In regards to how to refer to him, he had replied to this question with his own name. Tatsuya knew enough to know that this was either the Spanish or Italian word for "Mars".

That made sense. Though they had a fluent grasp of Japanese that might be misleading, closer inspection revealed that their facial structure was that of Caucasians. Having never lived out of the country, Tatsuya only had a theoretical grasp, but the man before his eyes appeared to carry distinctive features found on Latinos in America. His name was a call sign, no, there was an 80% or 90% chance that was a call sign, so referring to oneself as Marte wasn't surprising.

However, Tatsuya was unaware that there were Planet and Satellite Classes within the organization called Stars. He assumed that the title of Stars was the literal definition of a "fixed star". Thus, he only understood that "Mars" referred to the Planet-Class Magician "Marte" within Stars, and not the host's jealousy, obsession, and envy that came within someone from the Planet-Class who trained to be a substitute but still failed to be one of the Stars.

"So, Mr. Marte, or should I refer to you as Señor Marte? What do you need to talk about?"

There was no deeper meaning behind that question. For Tatsuya, "Marte" was nothing but a simple label.

Which was why when he found his opponent being enraged by these mere words, he only thought this was because the man had been cut off.

"That's Mister, Boy."

After being referred to as "Boy" by the Parasite named Marte, Tatsuya felt that the man's attempt to ridicule him was a clear sign he was losing his composure.

"Well, what is it?"

In order to continue biding time, Tatsuya didn't care that he had to continue this provocation, but since his comrades were getting fidgety, he elected to push the conversation forward.

"……Shiba Tatsuya. We bear no ill will towards you all."

For "Mr. Marte", it appeared that calling him by his full name was more appropriate than referring to him as "Boy".

Still, that detail was unimportant to Tatsuya (he never anticipated any overtures toward politeness).

"That's a little too vague for me to understand. Who is this we you speak of? Who are you referring to and what do you mean by ill will?"

Compared to that, what the other side was trying to convey was far more critical.

"—From this point forward, we Demons do not plan on any hostile action towards you Japanese Magicians."

(So they call themselves demons.....)

Not devil, ghost, or specter, but demon. This was how they saw their own existence. Since he never heard that term from Pixie, they must have discussed beforehand to decide on a term that humans could refer to them with.

Tatsuya wanted to break into a wry chuckle because he knew that there were people who referred to his Decomposition Magic as "Demon Right". The primary reason for that was because he usually activated his Decomposition Magic at whatever his right arm pointed to, but he was not endeared to the Parasites because of this.

"So? Is there anything else?"

In regards to the short comment from the Parasite known as Marte (the self-proclaimed Demon), Tatsuya also had a few things he wanted to say.

But first, it was probably best for the other side to finish speaking first.

"As the price for keeping us from seeing you as enemies, we hope that you will turn that robot over to us."

Tatsuya must have imagined Pixie's body shivering. After all, a robot had nothing to do with biological reactions.

"……I say, Mr. Marte. Please elaborate a little more on that. Even if I gave her to you, why do you want her? I can't answer that if you don't explain it clearly."

"I don't think I need to explain, do I? You are the ones who should have no reason to protect that robot."

"We will decide whether there is a reason or not."

Marte frowned upon hearing Tatsuya's response. After considering that his physical appearance and age were different, that displeased expression wasn't that strange any more.

"……It's in order to free our companion trapped within that robot."

Hearing this, Tatsuya intentionally tilted his head.

"So a robot can't be a host?"

Marte's expression grew solemn.

"I don't know how you guys think, but we are life forms. Furthermore, our connection with each other far surpasses you humans. In regards to saving a companion who is a life form but trapped with a lifeless vessel, is that something that is beyond you human's ability to grasp?"

However, both the voice and the tone were reined in.

"No, I can understand."

Tatsuya answer was just as decisive. Yet in this instance, Marte's answer was much like what he learned from Pixie earlier and could not rouse Tatsuya's interest. From another perspective, that also meant Pixie's words

were trustworthy. The question and answer phase could stop here, Tatsuya thought as he continued to speak in order to buy time for the trap to be prepared.

"But, how will you go about that?"

"Destroy the body. Once the host has been lost, then another host can be found."

"I see…… So that's how it is. Pixie, do you wish to be freed from there?"

((I do not, Master!))

Tatsuya wasn't seriously asking. Even if possessing a lifeless body, once it had expressed a desire for self-preservation, Tatsuya wasn't going to agree to have it destroyed. Within the three fundamental processes of all robots – they were forbidden from harming humans, obeyed humans, and were able to defend themselves so long as the first two were not broken – the 3H was a viable tool.

Except, the telepathically expressed rejection was fiercer than he anticipated.

((I am myself. My only wish is to be something possessed by the Master. That is who I am.))

Not only did she possess the original self-preservation instinct, she had her own will to boot.

((No matter what I was originally, from where my core desires came from, all of these things are no longer important to me. I loathe the idea that I will no longer be myself.))

Pixie's telepathy was sent not only to Tatsuya and the three Parasites, but to Honoka and Miyuki as well.

Honoka bit her lip.

Miyuki's lips turned into a grin.

"There you have it, Onii-sama."

"Quite so."

A grin also appeared on Tatsuya's lips.

Amazingly, a wry chuckle was not bubbling up at that unexpectedly passionate speech.

For some reason, Tatsuya didn't plan on avoiding the thoughts projected from the demon dwelling in the robot.

"Then, I think you can already guess this side's answer…… Before giving a decisive answer, I have two or three questions I would like to ask."

"You are more foolish than we imagined, Shiba Tatsuya. We are disappointed in you…… Very well, ask your questions."

"You said earlier that you bore no ill will towards Magicians, correct? Why did you say Magicians and not humans?"

There was no answer to that question.

No, he had asked that question with a mocking smirk on his face.

"If we agreed to your condition, then you Demons would no longer stand against Magicians. Then, what about humans who aren't Magicians, what about them?"

"……"

"After destroying Pixie's body, what kind of host are you looking for? No, there's no need to answer. I already know."

".....So you are a little clever beneath that stubbornness."

Marte shrugged at the steely gaze in Tatsuya's eyes and the two girls who fell into combat stances.

"We cannot understand. We already said that we will not fight you, so how are you still dissatisfied? Just as we demons cannot coexist with humans, you Magicians are also an alien existence to humans."

"Huh?'

Tatsuya emitted a false sound of surprise during the Parasite's sudden speech.

However, that speech was nothing more than inflammatory remarks.

Tatsuya would never believe any words uttered by that false tone were worth considering.

"My host is also a Magician."

As he said this, he patted his chest in an exaggerated manner.

There was a chance that this man was someone who worked as an inciter prior to being possessed by a Parasite. In that case, the call sign "Marte" didn't suit him. The name "Mercury" was far better for him.

Completely heedless of Tatsuya's cold gaze, the Parasite's speech grew in fervor.

"So I know as well. How Magicians are treated by humans."

"How are they treated?"

"For humans, Magicians are both tools and lab experiments. Humans will never care about the Magicians' feelings. They only use them as tools because of magic and as lab animals in order to create more magical power."

Though he felt like he had heard this speech somewhere before, Tatsuya still decided to allow the Parasite to finish.

"In regards to the humans who only seek to use you, what reason do you have to protect them? You have no such duty. You have your own will and dreams, do you not?"

Tatsuya locked his eyes on Marte's face after he finished his speech.

No matter how earnestly Marte stared at Tatsuya,

Tatsuya only replied with a "ha" of a sigh.

"Hardly, the ones being used aren't just the Magicians."

In response to the host with the malicious Parasite, Tatsuya spoke in a tone that had profound meaning.

"How should I say this.....? I feel like I've heard those lines from a book somewhere."

Then, his lips turned into a mocking smile.

"To see humans as nothing but foolish…… You are the true fool."

Fury flickered in the man's eyes.

Was that the Parasite's emotions or the host's feelings?

Mulling over whatever Marte wanted to say, Tatsuya continued.

"You will not harm us Magicians. That sounds all well and good, but you have already harmed my companions. My friends, who are Magicians. In regards to this, you have failed to utter a single apology, so where do you suppose I will dredge up the reason to believe your words about not harming us? There's no difference between this and respecting the human rights of Magicians. Not to mention using these empty words to swap with us as if trying to con us out of something. Even shamelessness should have a limit."

After his tirade, Tatsuya seemed to become bored and once again fell into a mocking smile.

"Come to think of it, I haven't told you our earlier answer yet. The answer, is no."

"Boy……"

"Please don't say you'll regret this or something clichéd like that? I would be too ashamed to be your opponent."

Killing intent filled Marte's eyes as he waved his right arm.

A small dagger appeared from his pocket. Based on the buttons on the hilt, this was no ordinary dagger and must carry some sort of contraption.

The other Parasites held similar daggers in their hands.

Seeing this, Tatsuya chuckled coldly.

"Well, that's easy to understand. Then, allow us to simplify things as well."

Tatsuya sneered theatrically.

"Throw down your weapons and surrender quietly. You will not suffer should you do so. I guarantee you all a happy life as experimental animals."

"You…… wretched hound of the humans!"

The Parasite who had possessed the body of the human was in turn consumed by the strong "desire" in the human host.

Possessed, being possessed, ad infinitum.

Most likely, the Magician known as "Marte" must have fiercely hated the humans who controlled him prior to his possession.

That was the natural conclusion one arrived at after hearing the fury in his roar.

Without any Activation Sequence, the precursor for magic appeared. So it was true that Parasites did not need Activation Sequences or incantations to cast magic.

However, on this point, Tatsuya's side was pretty much the same.

Faster than the Parasite's magic could materialize, Tatsuya's "Decomposition" shattered the information bodies that were trying to change reality.

The ability that dominated all Magicians, the power to decompose the information bodies.

That magic, "Gram Dispersion", was just as useful on the spells of inhuman creatures.

Soundless and without light, a silent means of attack and defense.

Yet Marte, who planned on using magic first before attacking, was completely befuddled when the magic unexpectedly fizzled.

Tatsuya was not going to miss that opportunity.

He fired at the joints of all four limbs and Marte rolled on the ground.

Even with a Parasite possessing them, there was no way for them change the structural composition of the human body. Even if they felt no pain, the limbs were rendered immobile once the joints were severed.

Tatsuya pointed his empty left hand at the Parasite on the road.

If the human vessel was destroyed, they would fly away seeking a new host.

They would also self-destruct and flee if frozen by Miyuki's magic.

Parasites didn't need Activation Sequences, so even an immobile body was probably still able to cast magic.

In order to completely nullify a Parasite, he needed to deliver direct harm to the mental information body.

Tatsuya tightly clasped the compressed block of psions in his palm.

Unfortunately, there was no guarantee that he would succeed.

Regardless, there was no hesitation in Tatsuya. If this didn't work, then they had to wait for the sealing specialists who understood Ancient Magic to arrive.

Right now, hesitation held no merit for him.

Imbuing the concept of "Rejection" inside his hand, Tatsuya's left hand stabbed towards the Parasite.

The compressed block of psions shot forth like a cannonball towards the Parasite's chest.

Not the brain, the heart.

This was the result based on the information he received from Pixie and after a lengthy discussion with Yakumo. They did not attach themselves to the human body's organs, but to the human spirit. In that sense, it was no different striking anywhere on the body. Given that, he might as well seek the deepest connection and aimed for the heart that provided fuel for all cellular activity.

The result was far more dramatic than he imagined.

Like a shrimp leaving the safety of the ocean, the Parasite's body started to violently spasm.

Bouncing like crazy.

The body that the Parasite had invaded was rejecting it.

Tatsuya's will had been injected into the Parasite and was rejecting the Parasite just as the Parasite was rejecting it.

"Onii-sama!"

Alas, they did not have the leisure to savor this.

Forced into a corner, Miyuki called out.

However, Tatsuya's "eye" never left Miyuki's side.

The moment danger approached Miyuki, Tatsuya would notice even without her calling out.

Exactly what was before him when he turned around,

Next to where Miyuki had not just frozen the four limbs and clothes of her opponent, but was also using Zone Interference to forestall her opponent's magic, Honoka was under siege from the small blades connected to some sort of device. Serving as her shield, Pixie was weathering the blows on her behalf.

"Honoka!"

"I'm fine!"

As if rejecting Tatsuya's offer of support, Honoka replied back in a stiff tone.

A powerful light dwelt in Honoka's eyes.

That burning light that dwelt there declared that she was not going to be a stumbling block.

That light was in Honoka's eyes,

Just as it was in her hair decorations.

Tatsuya felt the psion waves spike dramatically.

That was the harbinger of a massive increase in mental energy.

Not magic.

This was something more direct, the interference of the mind.

Immediately,

A furious psychic blast was released from Pixie.

As a price for its lack of fine-tuned control, the coarse form that was released carried the furious might to batter all phenomena. Even Miyuki's erected Zone Interference was shaken.

Among the currently living Magicians, even the Zone Interference belonging to one of the very best, Miyuki, had been shaken.

Tatsuya formed a new psion bullet and shot it into the Parasite that was fighting his sister.

Once again, the dance from the rejection effect occurred.

Yet now, Tatsuya and Miyuki's attention was no longer there.

Pure motion alteration interference strength – so called "psychokinesis", had just been released at that very spot.

Honoka, who was still in a daze from the sudden release of powerful psion waves, and Pixie, who stood there in a protective stance.

Of the Parasite who stood against them, it had long been blown out of sight.

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Shocked beyond words by the display on the monitor, Fujibayashi only recovered her wits once she heard the delighted chuckle from behind her and turned around.

"……Ho, never thought that I would witness something so fascinating here."

Behind the swivel chair, Elder Kudou coughed as he spoke with a tone that seemed to be looking for excuses at his granddaughter's glare that he was not acting his age.

"Did the 3H release that last burst of psychokinesis? I never heard that we have already developed robots capable of using psychic powers."

Fujibayashi was sitting in front of the control panel for the psion wave detector. There was no way to hide the readings displayed on the monitor in front of her.

"……I never heard of it either. From a technological standpoint, I thought that was impossible."

"Indeed. With the current technology, neither magic nor psychic powers can be manifested by machinery alone. In other words, there is something other than machinery inside that 3H."

"……"

A light sound that could be interpreted as either a sigh or a sob leaked from Fujibayashi.

"Is there a monster in that robot?"

"……"

"Though I have received reports on the Parasites, I didn't hear about this detail."

"We have not received a report about this either. This was only spoken of in private conversations."

"No, no."

Elder Kudou waved his hand as if to comfort his granddaughter, who had replied back in a stiff manner.

"Kyouko, I am not scolding you. That was not my standpoint from the very beginning. I am just highly interested."

Fujibayashi's poker face caved in.

The source of her fluctuating emotions lay directly before her gaze.

It had been a very long time since she saw the shadow of ambition flitting across her grandfather's face.

"I never imagined that robots could be used in this way……"

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The usual Fujibayashi would have already noticed.

However, right now she was acting in the capacity of an operator and not a hacker, so today she could only manipulate the system according to the rules. Under those conditions, even the "Electron Sorceress" would be hard pressed to catch observers who were acting beyond the system's defensive capabilities.

The observer who had just beheld the scene, Yotsuba Maya, removed the display monitor from her eyes before leaning back deeply into the chair and closed her eyes.

This lasted approximately 10 seconds.

After placing the display monitor back into a drawer in her desk, she picked up the bell and softly shook it. The crisp sound reverberated in the room that she alone inhabited.

"Did you call for me, madam?"

Opening the door, Maya's butler and confidante, old Hayama, appeared.

"Call Aoki here for me please."

"Understood."

Respectfully bowing, Hayama the butler once more left the room.

This time, a short moment elapsed.

Though there was no sound of any footsteps, an anxious presence drew closer before the sound of knocking could be heard.

"Come in."

"Excuse me."

Hayama replied in a solemn voice.

The anxious presence came from his side.

The one who came in was a butler far younger than Hayama (though still older than Maya) in his prime.

"Sorry for calling you so late, Aoki."

"No problem at all. So long as the madam gives the summons, I, Aoki, will immediately be at your side even if I was on the other side of the world."

Aoki had not learned how to perform Flash Step – in short, no one had accomplished instant teleportation – so "immediately" was physically impossible, but given that his exaggerated fashion of speaking was typical for him, neither Maya nor Hayama paid any extra attention to it.

"Though this is very sudden, there is something I wish to have immediately."

"As you wish."

Aoki was the financial manager who was responsible for overseeing all of the Yotsuba Family's assets. He believed that being able to deliver on these demands was the very purpose for his existence, so while there were a few problems with his personality, his abilities in both the legal and illegal fields were undeniably outstanding.

"Swiftly purchase the rights for the 3H-P94 on lend to the Magic University Affiliated First High. Money is no issue. Do this by any means possible."

Maya saying "money is no issue" wasn't surprising, but she rarely said directly "by any means possible".

"If that is too difficult, find a way for the current owner to be unable to transfer ownership rights. In particular, do not allow the other families from the Ten Master Clans to get ahold of it. Do not be concerned about the price involved for this task."

This was the first time in Aoki's recollection that she even handed out specific instructions in the event of failure.

"Understood."

For an instant, Aoki wavered there, but that failed to extend to his voice as he bowed respectfully.

As Aoki frantically left, Maya turned towards the waiting Hayama by her side and gave him a searching gaze.

"……Don't you have something to say?"

Yet in the end, Maya was unable to pierce Hayama's poker face and urged him to speak.

"I know it is not my place……"

He was still going to ask despite knowing this, so Hayama started speaking while bending at the waist. Though this just the customary phrase that observed decorum, that particular tone told Maya that this was not going to be a pleasant conversation.

"Shouldn't you be a little more prudent about using "Hlidskjalf"?"

Even so, she couldn't tell him to recant those words – or suggestion. The honest suggestion was just as bitter as she anticipated, but Maya failed to frown or become enraged.

As the operator, Maya – along with the other 6 operators who also had access rights – knew that there was more than just mere benefits better than anyone.

"—That is a product of pure science. Furthermore, at least when compared with magic, the risk of those black boxes is still lower."

"Maya-sama, I wasn't referring to that."

Hayama decisively cut short the twisted counter argument that she herself knew rang hollow. Maya wore an expression indicating she wished to change the subject.

"Furthermore, when it comes to black boxes, we don't even know where the real Hlidskjalf is located. Just because it has not lied to us yet does not guarantee that will not happen in the future."

Hayama's opinion definitely had a point.

Likewise, Maya was conscious of the danger even if he hadn't pointed it out.

"That's true…… Hayama, let's proceed with your idea. Recently, I have been too reliant on that ability to gather information."

"It would be a shame to abandon such a useful function. This is only a foolish thought on my part, but if it's Tatsuya-dono, he may be able to figure out where the real location of Hlidskjalf is. Once connected to the real one, complete dominance of Hlidskjalf may also be possible."

Hayama's words completely caught Maya by surprise. In order to fully comprehend his meaning, Maya contemplated this for a while before finally shaking her head.

"It's still too early."

As to what exactly was too early, the answer left that to one's imagination.

Hayama bowed deeply before leaving Maya and quitting the room.

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"What a mess……"

In response to the words that involuntarily slipped from Tatsuya's mouth, Miyuki raised her head from where she was taking care of the dazed and fainting Honoka.

"Now that you mention it…… That's kind of true. Onii-sama, should we leave here for now?"

Since the response was so natural, Tatsuya was practically on the verge of nodding.

(……No, that's actually OK.)

If he continued to believe that it was natural for someone to grasp the situation that quickly, sooner or later he was due for a comeuppance. However, right now there were other things to worry about.

There was that gigantic psychic blast from just now. That reaction was undoubtedly noticed throughout the Aoyama and Akasaka regions. Soon, unwanted guests would arrive in droves.

The Parasites that had been struggling furiously a moment ago had now quieted down in exhaustion. Just in case, he had bound their wrists, but as to what practical purpose that served, even Tatsuya didn't know. At least, so long as the vessel wasn't destroyed, they weren't able to flee the host's physical flesh, but their opponent could still "self-destruct" as a last resort.

(That's true…… If only we had some sort of technique from Ancient Magic.)

"Tatsuya-kun!"

"Sorry we're late!"

Speak of the devil, scratch that, just as he thought about that person, their voice rang out. About time they arrived.

Still, Tatsuya wasn't going to scold them for being "slow" since they were also using their methods to search for the Parasites. It's not like they were being lazy about it, so there was nothing to complain about.

Indeed…… There was nothing to complain about even if they arrived at a time when all the violence had ended, Tatsuya mentally stressed to himself.

"Um..... Tatsuya? Why do I get the feeling that your expression is a little terrifying?"

"My attitude is just a little belligerent."

"No, I don't know about belligerence, but somehow I don't feel that's the reason……"

After sweeping an eye over the strangely(?) petrified Mikihiko, Tatsuya began conversing with the extra individual who was not expected to appear.

"Leo, so you came as well."

"Ah, since I just recovered, might as well add me to the mix."

"Don't force yourself. Now, Erika……"

"Hm? What's up?"

As he spoke to Erika, who was watching the captives with a solemn gaze, Tatsuya unexpectedly spoke in a calm voice.

"Although we are forced to leave this area as soon as possible, can you prepare a way to transport these three?"

Seeing that none of them made any heart pounding actions, Tatsuya relaxed a little and began talking about the things on his mind. Tatsuya casually glanced around him to find the two motorcycles that the three of them arrived on. –As to who sat with who, Tatsuya wasn't able to see that.

"Eh, why?"

Reacting to Tatsuya's words, Erika took on a perplexed expression.

"What do you mean why, Erika?"

Tatsuya wasn't the one who said that. Unable to hide his agitated visage, Mikihiko quickly interrupted their talk.

"Did you not feel that shockwave? After releasing such a ridiculous amount of magic, I doubt the ones arriving here will be normal policemen."

"Though I really want to say that I've resigned myself to that from that start…… That would trouble Tatsuya-kun's group."

Besides a few looks snuck in between, this was the usual Erika. At the very least, neither Leo nor Mikihiko noticed anything different.

"So, will it be OK if we cart them to the storage shed at Miki's house?"

The "storage shed" that Erika spoke of was obviously not a literal storage shed. It was not one of the Chiba Family's facilities, but transported to a restrictive field operated by the Yoshida Family specifically designed to seal the Parasite.

"Will that be alright, Mikihiko?"

"Eh? Of course. Now that you mention it, that was our job all along."

Our referred to Ancient Magic users.

He probably meant sealing demons was the mission of the onmyoji (the Yoshida Family were of the Shinto sect and not actual onmyoji).

"Then Miki and I along with Leo will take over here. Tatsuya-kun, you guys should get going first."

"Why? During that time, I can wait here."

"I'm just a tagalong!?"

Ignoring Leo's furious roar for the moment, Tatsuya asked in amazement.

Erika seemed to have a hard time finding the right words.

"Tatsuya, well, uh……"

Tatsuya followed the stammering Mikihiko's gaze.

Ahead of him stood Pixie with a slightly ripped dress as well as Honoka's figure with several large rents in her halfcoat.

"……I'll call the car."

"I think that would be best."

And thus, Tatsuya left the scene to Erika's group.

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The siblings' home was within the zone of automated control, but Honoka's apartment was just outside the area for automatic vehicular control. After using the information terminal to summon the automatic car, there was no way to take Honoka home. In the end, the four of them got on the light rail at the station.

Even with their rather shocking attire, thankfully they did not receive any undue attention in the city.

At least, not any more than anticipated (when accompanied by Miyuki, being completely inconspicuous was frankly impossible).

Tatsuya's group got into a section with four seats on the train.

"Um, Tatsuya-kun……"

Since the act of boarding the train was so very natural, it wasn't until after the train departed that Honoka had a question. Even if they were going in the same direction, they couldn't get off halfway between stops……

"I'll take you home."

Upon hearing him utter the words she earnestly wished him to say but was unable to ask him do so, even the multiple instances of Honoka trying to be polite were unable to hide her radiant expression.

There was no way to alter seating arrangements in the cabin that the four of them sat in.

Miyuki sat next to Tatsuya, with Honoka sitting directly across from him.

Tatsuya glanced over at Pixie sitting diagonally across from him (for some reason, she was being treated as a customer rather than cargo), before turning his eyes back to Honoka since she had fallen quiet from the beginning.

"…...Onii-sama, it's probably about time to say something, otherwise I don't think Honoka can hold it in any longer?"

Seeing Honoka's anxiety spike after Tatsuya looked at her, Miyuki spoke up from his side.

"Ah, my apologies."

Tatsuya appeared to be unaware. After being pushed into a tight spot by his sister, Tatsuya acknowledged his error with an apologetic look on his face.

"Thank you for all of your hard work tonight, you three."

The words of praise were only the icebreakers, and proof of this was that Pixie had been included within. Still, this may be because he took into consideration that Pixie had also contributed quite a bit, but given that Tatsuya didn't differentiate between humans and robots, this sentence clearly wasn't given too much thought.

"So, Honoka. How should I put this……? Are you feeling a little strung out?"

There was no need to say this, but the next line was obviously an inquiry. Though somewhat confused at the sudden question, Honoka still shook her head.

"Really…… Pixie, if you are exhausted…… That phrase seems a little out of place. Do you notice any of the psions or energy reserves that make up your body being consumed?"

((Consumption is within naturally recoverable parameters, Master.))

"I see……"

"Onii-sama, is something lingering on your mind?"

"Not to the point of lingering……"

After shaking his head at his sister, Tatsuya once more looked towards Honoka.

"Earlier, when Pixie released that powerful burst of psychokinesis…… Honoka, do you have any idea what happened?"

"……No, what are you referring to?"

Honoka's eyes were filled with unease as she asked this.

True, the inferences behind this line of questioning were anxiety inducing.

That being said, of course Tatsuya had no intention of fanning the flames of uneasiness.

"I would like you to calm down and listen to me carefully."

The fact that this had descended to the point where an intentional icebreaker was required troubled Tatsuya himself to no end.

"The instant Pixie released that burst of psychokinesis, psions were provided for Pixie from Honoka."

"Eh?"

Honoka's jaw dropped at Tatsuya's words.

"……So Honoka was providing energy for Pixie?"

"No, it didn't feel like that."

In a rare showing, the voice Tatsuya used to answer Miyuki's question was not filled with confidence.

"This is similar to the process where psions are inputted into the CAD in order to deploy the Activation Sequence. Might have been something like priming…… Or maybe even resonance."

Honoka darted a fearful look at Pixie.

Pixie – the 3H-P94 unit with a Parasite on board, paid little heed to that. That being said, there was no way to tell the real situation since there was no change in expression.

A Magician transferred psions to a machine.

This phenomenon itself was perfectly familiar to Tatsuya, no, to modern magic users as a whole. However, that was a phenomenon that occurred with machinery constructed according to the systems developed by magic engineering "to do it this way". That function was not installed on the 3H.

Robots do not have powers beyond those granted to them by humans. By themselves, they were unable to learn new functions.

This phenomenon…… Must have not have been caused by Pixie's "mechanical body", but by her "real body" instead. Any other explanation was too outlandish.

It was perfectly natural for Honoka to feel uneasy and afraid.

"Mizuki did say this before…… That there is some sort of connection between Honoka and Pixie. Furthermore……"

Suddenly, Tatsuya stopped speaking.

Faced with her hesitant older brother wearing a bitter expression on his face, Miyuki responded with an alarmed look.

As if needled by an unspoken question, Tatsuya's face seemed to give up the struggle and continued speaking.

"……Furthermore, the medium involved appears to be Honoka's hair decorations."

"Huh?"

Honoka was wavering between surprise and fear earlier, but now she was entirely astounded.

Astonishment was not restricted to her alone.

Miyuki was also scrutinizing the rubber bands holding Honoka's hair with great attention.

"To be precise, it should be the crystal within. As to how this occurred, I have no idea……"

Honoka caressed the crystals in her hair decorations with both hands.

This was an unconscious reaction that didn't have any ulterior motive involved.

However, Tatsuya's hypothesis was immediately proven by the ensuing reaction.

On Pixie, in the middle of the torso area, a spiritual light emerged.

The light was not blinding. From a visual perspective, the strength was about the same as a lantern.

Still, given the suspicion about their mutual connection, this coincidence was a little too perfect.

Tatsuya and Miyuki's eyes both fell upon those hair decorations.

Honoka covered her hair decorations with both of her hands.

This was as if she was terrified that they would be taken away from her.

"The cause can be set aside for now…… A method to control that needs to be found first."

Tatsuya spoke in a tone that one used to comfort wary little animals.

Wariness turned into surprise as Honoka returned his look.

Tatsuya's eyes drifted from Honoka to Pixie.

"At any rate, bringing Pixie back looks to be the right idea."

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The high school force led by Tatsuya and company were not the only ones active tonight. The Saegusa and Juumonji force were inactive since Tatsuya had neglected to inform Mayumi and Katsuto about this action, but the many people in the Chiba force were activated on Erika's orders. In spite of this, the sole reason that Erika's group was the only one to arrive was because they were the strongest unit of those mobilized tonight. Erika, Leo, Mikihiko. Though their individual assessment was not spectacular, their combat capabilities towered over their peers. This was not just restricted to high school students, but adults as well. Even excluding techniques associated with weapons, their individual prowess was still in the top tier.

However, since this was an independent action, they were stuck in a situation where they had to guard the bound Parasites while awaiting

evacuation…… Except unwanted guests found them before their getaway vehicle arrived.

"Hey, what are you guys doing!?"

Two young men wearing police uniforms parked an automatic vehicle (equipped with a motor) near the streetlight before running over and shouting out a question.

Seeing these two, Mikihiko revealed a harried expression and Leo pouted in irritation, whereas Erika remained silent but retaliated with a belligerent gaze.

"What is this!? You guys should be high school students. What the heck is going on here!?"

Seeing the two men lying on the ground with their wrists bound behind their backs, the taller one shouted shrilly. In truth, this was probably a policeman's natural reaction upon finding citizens bound at night while lying on the ground.

"No, that's just……"

Feeling that this was a legitimate question, Mikihiko was frantically looking for excuses.

"Aren't you guys the ones who should be saying who you are?"

However, Erika's riposte bulled right over that question.

"What did you say!?"

"Hey, Erika!"

Faced with unexpected resistance, the men's rage seemed to intensify while Mikihiko turned an "unbelievable" look at her.

"Mikihiko."

A hand reached out to grab his shoulder.

When Mikihiko turned his head, he found Leo standing there with a highly entertained smile.

"Didn't you hear me? I will ask again. Who are you?"

Erika snorted at the intimidating glares shooting out from beneath the police caps.

"Don't you know? There shouldn't be any policemen in this area because such an order was given. That idiot older brother of mine can't possibly slip up at this juncture."

There was no evidence to support Erika's words.

If faced with real policemen, this wasn't a joke that should be bandied around.

In spite of this, the young men in front of her blatantly faltered.

"What nonsense is this?"

The faltering was wiped clean in an instant, but Erika didn't miss that brief second. It wouldn't have mattered even if there hadn't been a reaction.

That's because her words were not just bravado.

"If you wanted to disguise yourself, you should have chosen to be plainclothes detectives. In that case, hearing you out wouldn't have been an issue."

Erika was highly exaggerating about the hearing you out part.

The taller young man was about to explode at her, but his colleague stopped him. They switched places and the slightly shorter man stepped forward. Of the two, this one was shorter but far bulkier, and the intimidation factor was a lot higher.

"Looking for an excuse to flee is useless. You are suspected of assault. Let's take a walk."

"Hey~. So you're playing it out to the end."

Nonetheless, Erika was completely fearless. She continued to level a dismissive, challenging glare at them.

"Alas, I captured these two on the spot during an attempted rape. I believe this constitutes a citizen's arrest. Thus I am waiting for the real police to show up. There is no room for counterfeit policemen to appear here, un-der-stand?"

Mikihiko could only watch in admiration at his childhood friend reply so flippantly with a very logical argument. Even someone knowing this was a con would be misled. –Which was why he was a beat slow in detecting the hidden presence around him.

"Miki!" "Mikihiko!"

Without a sound – that was not an exaggeration, there literally was no sound – a black shadow attacked from above his head. The attack came from the wall surrounding the cemetery, and by the time Mikihiko realized this, it was already too late to meet the attack.

Mikihiko felt the blow land on his shoulder.

After being knocked flying by the sudden attack, he subconsciously took action to recover himself.

Leo raised his arm to the level of his head, to meet the oncoming downward swing of a rod. Just the sound alone was enough to tell the might behind this strike, and a normal person would undoubtedly suffer broken bones from this, but Leo took the blow as if it was nothing. Not only that, as his opponent touched the ground, he immediately retaliated with an iron fist of his own that fairly severed the air around him.

"Tch!"

Unfortunately, his fist barely brushed against the ambusher's body before being retracted.

In the flickering street light, Mikihiko saw an arc of lightning.

That man was apparently wearing a coat that shocked an opponent with high voltage electricity on contact.

Pressing his fist, Leo leaped back a step.

He saw the man wielding the rod prepare to pursue.

"Leo, get out of there!"

Mikihiko took the opportunity to swing his left wrist down. He used his customary hand to grab the fan-shaped CAD that fell out of his sleeve.

Just as Mikihiko was about to release magic to support Leo against the man attacking him, an object came flying from the flank to strike his CAD.

Though the CAD didn't fall, the spell had still been interrupted.

The object that had interfered with Mikihiko's spell traced a loop before returning to its original position.

He finally realized that it was a boomerang of some sort, which would then automatically return to the hand of the thrower. Of course, if that was just a simple boomerang, there would be no way for it to return once it came into contact with the target. This must be some sort of magical weapon.

After taking an unexpected jolt of electricity, Leo rolled back on the street to avoid the downward blow of the rod before pulling back and resetting his posture.

Mikihiko didn't have the leisurely time to worry about Leo.

There was more than one enemy.

He heard the "Psh" sound of compressed air being released and two connected cannonballs that looked like soda cans from a while ago come flying towards him from the street.

Mikihiko used the seal of the wind to meet the cannonballs.

The cannonballs stopped in mid-air. However, in the next instant, a net was deployed from the cannonballs and rushed towards Mikihiko. On the eight points of the octagon, there were miniature rockets to replace the arrested momentum.

What the hell is that!? Those were Mikihiko's undisguised feelings.

The speed wasn't all that impressive, but he had no idea what trickery lay within that net. Mikihiko used a "Leaping" spell to dodge the net.

Unfortunately, there were shadows waiting for him in the sky. The human silhouettes hurtled round throwing weapons.

Like a game of chess, this was the perfect arrangement.

For any normal Magician would it would have been "checkmate" right there.

Yet, the current Mikihiko was a far cry from normal. He had already recovered the strength that earned him a reputation as a child genius and had even progressed further.

In mid-air, Mikihiko used the air as a jumping board to "Leap" again and avoid the attacks of the three round projectiles and their master.

Still in the air, Mikihiko looked down upon the head of the man wielding a thin, long object – most likely a whip of some sort.

Finally, it was Mikihiko's turn.

He extended his bent leg.

His foot came into contact with the man's forehead.

The action itself became the "seal" to activate magic.

Through the point of contact between foot and forehead, a web of lighting spread out and encapsulated the man's body.

Once more stepping off the wind, Mikihiko landed on top of the wall.

There, he looked for Leo and Erika's figures.

Leo had recovered from that early surprise attack. Facing the opponent wielding the rod, he was engaged in a fierce battle using his bare hands. The reason why he had not suffered any injury from the electric attack was probably because he had wrapped himself with something. The other man also had a certain degree of skill, but in terms of speed and power, Leo was superior.

The problem was Erika.

The two who first struck up a conversation weren't very adept at acting, but their fighting skills were quite capable.

No matter how he put it, Erika actually had to defend against their attacks. They must be wearing special armor beneath their uniforms, though the uniforms themselves may also be custom made.

Still, durability alone was insufficient to stand against Erika's sword strikes. Each time they came into contact with Erika's sword blows, something would flitter off the surface of the clothes. Warily, Erika continued to slowly press her attack forward.

If the weapon she held was any longer, then she probably wouldn't need so much time. Unfortunately, the weapon she had today was a short rod

that could morph into a wakizashi. Erika was avoiding dust that was most likely some sort of poison, so there was no chance she could close into close quarters.

Thanks to him seizing a higher vantage point, Mikihiko finally noticed something.

The three of them were being slowly pulled away from the bound Parasites.

In addition, the distance between the three of them was also growing. If this continued, the captives might be taken away before support arrived.

Even if this was pushing it a little, they had to take care of this quickly.

The next instant after he made up his mind, no, it was likely their enemy had also judged that they couldn't hold out much longer.

In terms of timing, Mikihiko's assessment and their opponents' judgment were of an accord.

The enemy was one step ahead.

They heard the sound of something falling to the ground.

Leo kicked aside his opponent while Erika unleashed a chain of razor sharp blows to pull away from her opponent.

"Get down!"

The same time that call rang out, a cocoon of air wrapped around Erika and Leo.

That was the defensive barrier Mikihiko had devised.

The explosive that had fallen from above detonated before coming into contact with the ground and unleashed a thick smoke that obscured the street lights.

The sound of heavy metallic objects falling continued.

Mikihiko called the wind to blow apart the smoke.

They immediately found out what had happened.

Metallic arms trailing down from the sky grabbed the Parasites' bodies and swiftly retracted. The source of the lines came from a pitch black flying ship hiding in the night sky that had appeared at some point in time.

The silence of it all was astounding, and there was no sign of magic being used. Without a sound or any sign of magic waves, none of them had noticed the unidentified flying ship flying overhead.

The bodies of the captives vanished into the ship.

Mikihiko saw Erika ready herself to slash upwards. Though her slashes were not the same level as Strategic-Class Magic, she might be able to shatter the fuel compartment and cause a crash.

"Erika, stop!"

However, thanks to Mikihiko's intervention, Erika reluctantly stood down. She also knew very well that it would be a catastrophe if the flying ship crashed here.

While their attention had been drawn away by the flying ship, their ambushers' shadows also disappeared. Needless to say, the counterfeit policemen's party were of the same affiliation with the flying ship.

"What a headache……"

Mikihiko nodded as if in complete agreement, to which Erika responded with a particularly brilliant smile.

"So what are we going to tell Tatsuya-kun?"

Mikihiko was asking Leo for help.

Leo shrugged when Mikihiko looked at him.

"It's already so late, I don't think we should trouble him, right?"

Leo shrugged again at Mikihiko's gaze.

"Ha, you're right. At this hour, might as well tell him tomorrow."

Their hollow laughter was mixed into the slight wind that blew towards the center of the city at night.

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"We have captured the specimen."

This was the headquarters of the JSDF Intelligence Department 3rd Division located in the basement of one of the buildings in Ichigaya.

Upon hearing the report from the deployed stealth airship, the assistant director in charge of this entire operation – this department did not employ the JSDF's ranking system and used entirely falsified ranks – nodded as his expression seemed to sigh in relief.

"Though there were a few surprises, we still accomplished our objective."

When the agents disguised as policemen had been knocked unconscious by mere high school students and a HAR, the first thing that flashed across his mind was "demotion". Now that he might have avoided ruining his superior's mood, the assistant director could relax.

He knew very well that the "specimen" they had captured was the "vampire" that disturbed the peace, but he was unaware that the real identity of the vampires was actually Magicians who had been possessed by monsters called Parasites. Nor was he aware that one of the captured vampires was a retired soldier from the USNA born in Mexico and that the reason for his retirement was that he lost his magic due to an injury suffered during training. The assistant director had simply been ordered to capture a specimen of the vampires.

The reason why they were observing Tatsuya was because the higher ups told him there was a higher probability they would come into contact with the vampires if they shadowed Tatsuya's group. Though as to why a high school student, despite being known as Magician larvae, would have a link to vampires, that reason was beyond him. His subordinates being instantly nullified immediately dispelled the preconception that they were just high school students, but the mystery in regards to why high school students were so strong only deepened. Still, it looked like they would no longer have to trouble themselves with ridiculously strong high school students. That was the reason why the assistant director could breathe a sigh of relief.

Their task was only to temporarily "safeguard" the specimen. Any procedures beyond that were done by his superior, the director. One of the

tricks to the organization's continual survival was not questioning their superior's tasks. The request for obtaining the specimen didn't come from the government but from their sponsors, and the assistant director was somewhat aware that the real client was that particular family from behind their sponsor, but he really didn't want to know.

"As ordered, transport the target to the 'icebox'. Just in case, up the dosage."

After ordering his subordinate to use low temperature anesthesia used to induce hibernation on Magicians to nullify the Parasites before moving them to the facility, the assistant director returned to his seat to report to his superiors the result of his mission.

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"That damnable Koichi, still so enamored with intrigue. It's practically part of his personality now."

Just listening to the words may give the impression that this was a complaint, but after hearing her grandfather utter this phrase in a highly entertained voice, Fujibayashi pretended not to hear anything.

The sudden intrusion of the 3rd Division's stealth craft shocked Fujibayashi, but she dealt with the aftereffects as swiftly as usual. She immediately used the flying ship's wireless signal to pinpoint the organization it was affiliated with.

Likewise, infiltrating the connection to the basement in Ichigaya was just business as usual. As expected of someone whose talents earned her the name "Electron Sorceress".

"Sir, what is Saegusa-san's goal here?"

She chose to the word "sir" and not "grandfather" here to observe protocol while on the job. Kudou Retsu understood this, so he didn't make a point over the formal reference of "sir".

"I'm not privy to what Koichi is thinking. Though I do have a few guesses on worst possible scenarios."

That being said, he had no intention of playing along with his granddaughter's speech pattern as Elder Kudou continued to speak as if addressing kin.

"Worst, eh……?"

"Hm. Kouchi knows that Maya is interested in the Parasites, so he may have wanted to seize control of it."

"The lady from the Yotsuba Family has expressed interest?"

"In the Yotsuba Family, the side branch Kuroba Family is responsible for gathering intelligence. Furthermore, the Kurobas apparently adopted assassination against the Parasites and investigated quite a few things afterwards."

"A side branch responsible for gathering intelligence…… The Yotsuba Family is certainly unique."

"Well, the 28 families were originally just like side branches for the development and research of Magicians. Indeed, no other family besides the Yotsuba Family has adopted the side branch system."

Elder Kudou wore a self-depreciating smile as he probably recalled his own origins. Fujibayashi made no attempt at any third rate words of comfort and merely waited for her grandfather's next words.

"Setting that aside…… Knowing that the Yotsuba have an interest in the Parasites, Koichi would then act. That guy will want to surpass the Yotsuba by any means possible. How tragic it is that the demon from 30 years ago has still not been exorcised yet……"

In Fujibayashi's eyes, the way Elder Kudou said this was as if he himself was revisiting the past. Knowing that wasn't a very pleasant recollection, she used a slightly stronger tone to recall her grandfather from his memories.

"So what are we going to do?"

"What do you mean by going to do?"

"I believe that allowing the Intelligence Department 3rd Division to go rogue isn't a wise course of action."

"That's true…… If they were able to handle it any better, leaving them alone wouldn't be a problem."

As Fujibayashi predicted, Elder Kudou had returned from the world of his memories and his mind was fully focused on the present.

"Kyouko, can you anonymously leak some intelligence to the Yotsuba?"

"I think I can."

"Then that should be enough. Maya will think of what to do from here on out."

Saegusa Koichi's plot would be foiled by the Yotsuba. Knowing the backstory, Fujibayashi felt that this was a cruel punishment. Still, Fujibayashi had no intention of disagreeing with her grandfather's proposal as she immediately turned back to the controls.

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After seeing Honoka home and returning Pixie to the original garage, by the time Tatsuya and Miyuki arrived home, it was already late into the night even though the date hadn't changed yet.

That being said, for the siblings' age, this wasn't a particularly late hour. Though they had not engaged in full scale combat, the nerves were still so stimulated that there was no sign of sleepiness.

"Onii-sama, it's Miyuki, can I bother you for a moment……?"

It was a rare occurrence indeed for Tatsuya to be in his own room studying a subject other than magic instead of being in the lab in the basement after eating dinner and taking a bath. The primary reason why he let Miyuki into his room was because neither of them could sleep.

At this time, Tatsuya appeared to be trying to use the books to lull him to sleep. Though it wasn't entirely appropriate for siblings to visit the bedroom (pretty much a private room) at this hour, Tatsuya felt that speaking with Miyuki might improve his mood a little.

"Sure, come in."

"Then, I'm coming in."

Tatsuya naturally leaned over the monitor that served as the table's surface as he heard the sound of a door closing coming from the entry way.

"……So, what is it?"

The voice was neither high nor low and was just a simple question being voiced.

In spite of this, an unnatural lull still manifested.

Miyuki didn't immediately reply to her brother's question as she obediently sat on the bed.

Even so…… A series of questions started churning through Tatsuya's brain.

—Not too long ago, his sister still favored pajamas.

—Was her current appearance the result of Shizuku's recent appearance taking root?

Right now, the pressing issue was the style of Miyuki's pajamas.

Objectively speaking, she was currently wearing a nightgown.

Technically, she had a small jacket draped over the outside and the gown was neatly fastened.

However, from the chest to the knees, the barest hints of snowy white flesh could be seen through the thin layer of silk, filled with mesmerizing temptation.

(Thankfully I'm the only one who saw that…… Isn't she a little lacking in the self-consciousness that young ladies usually possess?)

As her brother, Tatsuya was highly concerned about his sister's lack of wariness, --yet whether this was truly right or wrong, there was unfortunately no judge present to determine the outcome.

On the other side, Miyuki appeared to be highly pleased with her brother's blank stare and an embarrassed smile graced her face. Still, that visage swiftly altered to one of seriousness.

"Have I interrupted Onii-sama from studying……?"

"Hardly. Miyuki, you know that such things are not necessary for me."

Anyone else would have felt a surge of disgust at those words, but there was no sign of envy, amazement or praise from Miyuki as she took those words as perfectly natural.

Tatsuya rose from his position before the table and walked to the bedside before taking a seat beside Miyuki. Of course, there was a definite distance between them. Yet, from the side and not the front came a look that clearly said "Did you have something to say?" that urged Miyuki onward to voice her hesitant, stuttering question.

"Onii-sama…… Miyuki is really conflicted right now."

"Conflicted?"

Despite knowing that something was on Miyuki's mind, this was still a sudden question.

Tatsuya repeated part of Miyuki's sentence and kept his eyes fastened on her, yet she failed to raise her eyes to her brother.

"Right now, I completely don't understand, what magic is….. What we Magicians are……"

Bemusement covered Tatsuya's face.

He was completely not expecting such a profound question. Rather than belonging to the field of magic studies, it may be more appropriate to say this came from the realm of psychology.

While he didn't feel that he was unable to answer the question, Tatsuya didn't have an option that was appropriate enough to answer Miyuki's question.

"What makes you think that?"

Regardless, Tatsuya prompted her to continue speaking.

"From a fundamental perspective, magic and super powers are one and the same. Onii-sama knows this better than anyone else when it comes down to theory or practical application."

"I think knowing that better than anyone else may be a stretch…… But go on."

"Parasites – demons also know how to use magic. When comparing the magic they use with the ones we cast, there is nothing different besides the procedure."

"True."

Miyuki's hands were tightly clasped on top of her knees, but she suddenly twisted around towards Tatsuya. Placing her hands in the space between Tatsuya and herself, she leaned forward towards Tatsuya.

Her eyes were filled with unease.

"I have been wondering whether that's…… the result of demons possessing Magicians. Was the demon using the Magician's mind to cast magic?"

Terror lay in the depths of that unease.

"Yet, after seeing the power Pixie used and Onii-sama's ensuing explanation, I have found that I am in error."

"Are you referring to the psychokinesis from that time?"

"Yes."

There was another lull before the conversation resumed. Miyuki was afraid of verbalizing the rest. She was terrified of the idea that her theory would be reinforced if she transformed her speculation into words. That was the feeling Tatsuya got from her.

"Telepathy is the ability to communicate from one consciousness to another. The original Parasite that is akin to a spirit form was capable of this, so that's nothing surprising. When I heard that she used psychokinesis to create facial expressions, I also thought nothing of that matter."

Tatsuya felt that Miyuki's face was getting closer.

The wavering emotions in her eyes were becoming more obvious.

"Yet, that burst of psychokinesis…… While rough in design that definitely still was Move-Type Magic. And that magic was activated after resonating with Honoka, right?"

"……Yes."

Tatsuya answered with some hesitation. Though that answer was a little dubious, Tatsuya was practically certain that the phenomenon between Honoka and Pixie was nearly the same as what could happen between those with close blood ties, much like the "resonance" rarely observed in Magicians who are identical twins – a phenomenon that occurred when the magic calculation area of one of them is stimulated, the other one's magic calculation area becomes more active as well.

"3H…… As a machine, it does not have the power to wield magic. However, Pixie's psychokinesis was not the power of the host, but a power that came from the monster, the Parasite."

Miyuki lowered her head when she finished. Immediately, she brought her eyes back to him as if she was about to break into tears.

"Since magic is practically the same as psychokinesis, does that mean demons have the same power that we Magicians do?"

Tatsuya finally understood the root of his sister's unease.

"Why is magic called magic? ……Could it be that our power originated from them?"

Miyuki's face drew even closer.

She was close enough that he could feel her breathing. At this time, Tatsuya stood up from the bed.

Superficially, he looked to be avoiding Miyuki, but the reality was far different.

Kneeling in front of Miyuki, Tatsuya caught Miyuki's eyes.

"Miyuki….. You're overthinking this."

Miyuki rotated her soft, flexible body and used her arms to support her leaning body. She took in Tatsuya's gaze – and stored it within her heart.

Gently taking hold of his sister's shoulders, Tatsuya gradually shifted his sister's leaning body to the proper position bit by bit.

"While magic is referred to as the 'law of demons' in Japan, the word magic in English contains the connotation for 'ability of sages'."

Miyuki gave a small "ah" sound.

"As to where the power of magic came from, that is currently unknown. Magic Sequences rewrite other information bodies to bring about phenomenon alteration, and though we understand this system, exactly why is this change possible and why the magic calculation area in the human subconscious is able to do so are still enigmas."

Tatsuya wore the confused expression of a master berating a student making a mental error despite being more talented than himself as he smiled.

"For that matter, we cannot even guarantee that magic is something created by Magicians. It would be too great a leap in logic to say that since demons can use magic, then there must be a connection between Magicians and demons."

"That's true……"

"Furthermore, the real identity of the Parasite could be said to be independent information bodies that originated from the human psyche. Since they came from the human consciousness, then its power should come from humans. It would be far more appropriate to say the power of demons come from humans instead of saying that the power of Magicians come from demons."

"I see…… Onii-sama is completely right."

The anxiety in Miyuki's eyes faded away into nothing.

Tatsuya got the impression that Miyuki seemed to have understood a tad too quickly, but this was still more constructive than doubt, so there was no reason to ruin her mood.

"You were thinking that you are kin to demons and not humans, and that is why you couldn't sleep, right?"

Tatsuya's words did carry any inflection that poked fun at his sister.

However, as if a button had been pressed, Miyuki blushed even more furiously than usual. Frozen to the point that she forgot to even cover her face, Miyuki rebooted and swiftly turned to face the wall.

Splayed out over the bed in an odd position, she faced the wall without budging an inch.

There's no need to be that embarrassed…… Tatsuya thought to himself, but he did acknowledge that his sister's current state was adorable.

"In that case……"

He stealthily moved his lips next to Miyuki's earlobe as he spoke softly.

"Until you fall asleep."

She was so adorable that it roused Tatsuya's mischievousness.

As expected, Miyuki's body gave a huge start.

It was as if she was ready to fly to the ceiling.

"Should I stay by your side?"

Miyuki slowly turned her head around, blushing the entire time. As she watched Tatsuya with abashed and tender eyes, she spoke in a feathery tone.

"……Can you hold my hand?"

Overdid it, Tatsuya thought.

Tatsuya had no authority to deny her.

Until Miyuki fell asleep, Tatsuya sat on the bed tightly clasping Miyuki's pearly white hand.

Fortunately, Miyuki immediately departed for dreamland.

His sister's happy, slumbering face was Tatsuya's greatest reward. Even so, it was hard to hide his mental exhaustion.

Carefully walking away and turning off the light, Tatsuya left Miyuki's bedside.

Silently closing the door, he walked towards his own room.

Halfway back, Tatsuya realized something.

Even Miyuki, who had received higher education as a Magician, had thought that there was a connection between Magicians and demons instead of focusing on magic alone.

She took Magicians for something inhuman.

If someone well versed in magic like Miyuki thought so, then those who were unfamiliar with magic and were not Magicians themselves could hardly be faulted for seeing Magicians as demonic.

It would hardly be surprising if they thought Magicians were not quite human, or frankly "something inhuman" altogether……

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The next morning.

When Tatsuya got to school, he immediately dragged Erika, Leo, and Mikihiko out of the classroom. Though he saw that Mizuki watched them with nervous eyes, he never gave her an opportunity to rescue them.

Their destination was the roof.

Not only was it the coldest time in the morning, not a single person was on the wind-exposed rooftop. Tatsuya didn't want to stay too long himself.

"You guys have something to tell me."

The three people on the rooftop weren't intentionally keeping quiet. However, seeing that their friend had specifically called them up here and spared them the small talk, no one could knock Tatsuya for losing his patience even if his tone was a little anxious.

The three of them glanced at each other and all wore resigned expressions. As their expressions clearly showed that they had given up, they wordlessly determined who was going to be their spokesperson with high speed.

"Tatsuya, um, actually……"

The one who spoke with trepidation, or maybe in a self-defeating manner, was Mikihiko.

"Are you saying that you guys let the Parasite get away?"

Though Tatsuya jumped the gun because he wanted to get this over with quickly, he couldn't help but sigh when he saw Mikihiko raise his head in shock as if he had heard of something impossible.

"I'm not going to be upset if that's all it is. Although it's going to be a little difficult to recapture….. But there's nothing to be done if it already got away."

Though he didn't hide his disappointment, this wasn't a completely unsalvageable situation. Just as Tatsuya expressed his stance and was about to return to the warm classroom,

"No, that's not it, Tatsuya!"

Mikihiko frantically grabbed a hold of him.

"Yeah, it's not like they got away….. Well, technically they did get away……"

Based on those mutually exclusive words, his friends hadn't gotten to the important part, so Tatsuya turned his gaze on to Leo.

"They were taken by someone else."

"Were they that strong?"

Tatsuya's reaction to Leo's answer was a little different than the usual approach to this situation.

However, the detail that Tatsuya cared about the most was precisely this one.

They had been in the same class for almost a year. In Tatsuya's eyes, the three of them had the power now to match any frontline combat Magician and maybe even the members of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

Of course, they still couldn't take on Kazama or Yanagi (without "Trident", even Tatsuya couldn't defeat them), but they could definitely hold their own against the rank and file.

"It was unfortunate that we failed, but from a strength perspective, they weren't particularly capable opponents."

"They did have exceptional gear. That's the first time I ran into someone wearing a jacket that could numb an enemy on contact."

"They also had durable armor that scattered dust on impact. If only I had had a longer weapon yesterday."

"No wonder."

That sort of equipment was certainly unique, but then again, that made it easier to identify the enemy.

"In the end, they even got on a black airship and fled. That was frustrating."

"OK, we should be thankful that nothing more serious happened."

Hearing Tatsuya's words, or more like after hearing Tatsuya's words, Erika couldn't help but turn a "Hm?" look on Tatsuya.

"Tatsuya-kun, don't tell me you already know who they are?"

"Sort of. I never made direct contact with them before, but I think I can guess."

"Who are they?"

After considering the nature of the answer, it wouldn't be strange that saying something and not saying something both held merit.

"JSDF Intelligence Department Counterintelligence 3rd Division. With that sort of interesting equipment and even a stealth airship for transport, it must be the 3rd Division."

Tatsuya's answer was very direct. Nor did there appear to be any sign he was holding back. It may be that not only Erika, but even Leo and Mikihiko had become embroiled in his affairs.

"Does…… Tatsuya know that because he's a member of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion?"

"Ah?"

Even so,

"I don't recall telling Erika the unit I belong to……"

At someone pointing out something they didn't remember, Erika shook her head.

"……I see, you heard from Miyuki."

"After seeing something like that, there's no way I wouldn't ask."

The item Erika was referring to was probably the Movable Suit. Despite uncovering Tatsuya's identity, Erika still hadn't connected Tatsuya to the "Scorched Halloween" yet.

"Since we were engaged in full blown combat with the invading force, a clearly differentiated chain of command couldn't be avoided. Still, I do hope you will keep that a secret."

"I know. I don't want to be arrested for espionage."

Compromising the National Secrecy Act was synonymous to being suspected of spying. The majority of the citizens protested that this invasion of privacy in the latter half of the previous century, so Japan had since returned to being a normal country.

"Hey, since you know who our opponents are, you wouldn't happen to know where they carted those guys off to, right?"

Erika's mood rebounded quickly as she asked in a hopeful voice.

Unfortunately,

"Without knowing their objective even I can't be sure."

Tatsuya frankly shook his head. That was how reality was.

"True…… Our opponent is a government organization, so they must have multiple hideouts."

"That's because there's a budget, though it's not inexhaustible. Still, they're probably like a wily rabbit that has three different hiding holes."

Just as Mikihiko said, this time their opponent was a government organization. In terms of fighting assets at their disposal, they were on a fundamentally different level than foreign forces that had illegally invaded

their soil. They had always enjoyed home field advantage, but this time that was transferred to the other side.

"Meh, it's not like we have to worry too much. This wouldn't have ended even if you guys had taken care of the interlopers from last night. We also know that the Parasites are onto Pixie. We just have to lay a snare that cannot be stolen from us next time."

Tatsuya wore an evil smile as he reassured the three of them. –Despite the kind words, Erika, Leo, and Mikihiko all backed away fearfully from that expression, but Tatsuya seemed not to care.

"Let's table this here. Lets hurry back to the classroom before we freeze here."

Though no one present would feel that this chill would be anything serious, at the end of the day, cold was cold.

None of the three raised any objection as they followed behind Tatsuya going indoors.

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Coincidentally, at the same time that Tatsuya and Erika's group were having a chat on the rooftop, Colonel Libra also received a phone call on her end.

"I'm terribly sorry for bothering you so early in the morning, Ms. Virginia."

"It's you again."

The image that appeared on the screen was the face she saw yesterday. The 15-year old young lady who claimed to be the spokesperson of the Yotsuba, Kuroba Ayako. This morning, she was still wrapped in silk and lace.

"School…… No, excuse me."

Except while she was fulfilling her duties, Colonel Barans was pretty much a moralist. That was why she was on the verge of telling off a young girl who plainly was of the age that she should be in school but was evidently engaged in non-school related activities this morning.

"Thank you for caring."

Keenly discerning what Virginia was thinking, Ayako revealed a perfectly polite smile.

"Still, Ms. Virginia need not worry. I have long since obtained the necessary credits to graduate."

Since Virginia was not aware of the Japanese middle school system, there was no way for her to judge if Ayako was lying.

"No, I was the one who said something pointless. So do you have news on your end?"

Colonel Barans was only observing the forms by asking this question. She honestly was not expecting to receive any worthy intelligence on the first day.

"Indeed. Actually last night, the JSDF Intelligence Department Counterintelligence 3rd Division captured a Parasite. Right now, we have confirmed that one of them was a former Magician of the USNA military. The head told me that I should inform Ms. Virginia of this and I have done so."

"Inform" via phone was a slight problem. Still, Barans wasn't planning on wasting breath on that, since the information that was just provided to her far outweighed that.

"Are the Parasites on the move again?"

"Family members have reported that Parasites who have lost their vessels found new hosts. These should be the people who captured one."

At the same time she said this, Ayako transferred encrypted documents to Colonel Barans's terminal. After reading the table of contents for the documents that automatically decrypted themselves, she verified that one of them contained personal information with a picture attached.

"There are 3 captured Parasites. Among them, this is the only one we have currently identified. If you wish, I can also inform you of the location where they are being held captive."

Just looking at the table of contents was not sufficient to clarify why this retired Magician was so important, but leaving him alone was not an option for Colonel Barans.

"Please do so, Ms. Kuroba."

"Understood."

The young lady in the picture bowed as the information was sent over. Without losing decorum, Colonel Barans gave a simple thank you before hanging up and immediately examined the documents.

Colonel Barans's expression turned dark.

She turned towards an encrypted line specifically prepared for her and swiftly sent out a message.

The message contained orders to prepare for mobilization tonight.

The recipient of that message was Major Angelina Sirius.

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The first subject of the day was General Studies. Students were allowed to read and work on problems, though some students chose to listen to music in order to enhance their studying.

Tatsuya had always allowed the text to scroll on its own, so today he brought his earphones. He would listen to the synthesized music while thinking about questions that had nothing to do with school.

It was true that he heard about the Counterintelligence 3rd Division's name and unique features from the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

Yet, this wasn't like it was incomprehensible for a branch of the Intelligence Department.

Within the Intelligence Department, they were the division that had the closest relationship with the Saegusa Family. They were a detachment that had participated in this action as the hands and feet of the Saegusa Family. To be precise, they should be a unit that had mobilized with the Saegusa Family's support in the background, which was how Tatsuya speculated this opposing force to be.

Still, this turnout felt rather surreal to Tatsuya.

He was working under the assumption that this incident happened under the Saegusa Family's orders.

Using a stealth airship as the centerpiece to forcibly take the Parasites seemed a little too violent.

Tatsuya wasn't that familiar with the modus operandi of the head of the Saegusa Family, Saegusa Koichi, and therefore he was unable to discern the Saegusa Family's motives. However, if this sort of high stakes gambling was the Saegusa Family's normal style, it would have led to a conflict with the Yotsuba Family a long time ago.

So in the end, who was it that plotted this sequence of events?

There was also the possibility that this wasn't the will of the Saegusa Family and simply the Counterintelligence 3rd Division going rogue.

(Given that the army has disobeyed their hidden backer and acted on their own…… Then his motive must lie around some goal that is connected with the army's existence.)

Then what is the army after?

As the violent organization dedicated to protecting the country, the army's sole purpose was to directly meet another country's direct overture of violence.

The nature was too complex to explain in one or two sentences.

However, from the surface, the army's intent was glaringly obvious.

The army's sole goal is victory. All other goals were secondary to that.

There were many paths to victory, and failing where they were supposed to fail was also a form of victory.

No matter what, everything was fine as long as they won.

Anything after winning was the business of politicians. The army only had to worry about how to seize victory.

Thus, the army would pursue power.

An intelligence unit that believed itself a cut above the norm and went rogue would undoubtedly pursue strength as its goal.

Thinking along those lines, a chill ran down Tatsuya's spine.

It couldn't be that the 3rd Division was trying to harness the Parasites – the demons for military purposes?

That was far too dangerous, Tatsuya couldn't help but think.

One of the key indictments that painted Magicians in a negative light within the USNA was the accusation that Magicians summoned demons to this world. Though the agitators blamed military ambition as the reason behind summoning the demons, the slander here was obvious. However, using Parasites for martial purposes would only give more ammunition to the anti-Magician faction.

(No, the end result would be the same if the Ten Master Clans were plotting behind the scenes.)

Regardless of whether the Counterintelligence 3rd Division went rogue or were operating under orders from the Saegusa Family, Tatsuya's renewed consideration placed them both at the same degree of risk.

A mere pup like him may have no business doing so, but a warning shot needed to be fired across the Saegusa Family's bow.

Though this was definitely going to inconvenience Mayumi as she was preparing for a test, he really needed to find some time to talk. The moment the thought crossed his mind, he used his personal terminal to set up a meeting with Mayumi.

—Though his brain may say that this would inconvenience her, Tatsuya really didn't care that this would make it tough for Mayumi.

After sending a message to Mayumi in the middle of class, he got a reply back within one minute. Although the message was flagged as "urgent"……

(Isn't that person supposed to be a test taker?)

There wasn't too much time until the test began. Though there was no danger of her failing, he still couldn't help but think "Is this really a good

idea for a test taker?". Oh well…… Any further thought on this matter was minding someone else's business. Since she could reply to urgent messages immediately, she must have no complaints on the matter.

After ruminating over this, Tatsuya opened the mail.

The message Tatsuya sent over was "Can I see you within the next two days to talk about something?"

Mayumi's reply was "Come immediately to the Student Council Room."

Even though she was able to freely come and go from school, she still came to school often.

Furthermore, her current location was not the classroom or the library, but the Student Council Room.

……Is this really a good idea? Test taker? Tatsuya thought from the bottom of his heart.

Since Tatsuya was the one who reached out for a meeting, of course he was the one who wanted to handle the situation as soon as possible, so Tatsuya was walking directly for the Student Council Room.

Though this was bona fide ditching school, cheating the monitoring system was difficult but hardly impossible.

Tatsuya used the ID card that someone he didn't know set up for full access and opened the door. Probably because this was still class time, Mayumi was the only one in the room.

After exchanging greetings – Mayumi thought that was enough whereas Tatsuya had to consider for a moment about the right attitude – Tatsuya sat down across from Mayumi and immediately conveyed what had happened.

"……This is the situation. I think that airship belongs to the Intelligence Department Counterintelligence 3rd Division that is rumored to be connected with the Saegusa Family. As to exactly why they wanted to capture a Parasite, I have no idea. However, it is extremely dangerous if they plan to use the Parasite for military purposes. Though I do not know if they can be completely destroyed, sealing them would probably be the best bet."

"Counterintelligence 3rd Division? Though not an adult, even I as a member of the Saegusa Family do not know about this. Tatsuya-kun, I'm amazed that you are in the know for something like this."

"I would greatly appreciate it if you would not ask me for my sources."

"……Well, Tatsuya-kun seems to have a lot on his plate so I won't ask. Compared to that, can you tell me why you went after the Parasite alone?"

"I felt that if senpai's side also sent men, they would be too wary to come."

"Is that all there is?"

Mayumi watched Tatsuya playing dumb with a highly displeased expression on her face.

"I'll let it go for now……"

Yet, before the completely unperturbed Tatsuya, she was about to shrug her shoulders but stopped the motion halfway.

"Tatsuya-kun wants me to try and persuade my father, correct? So that the Parasite captured by the Intelligence Department can be returned to Erika-chan and her group."

Though this hardly mattered, at some point Mayumi started to refer to Erika as "Erika-chan", something that would have prompted a highly unwilling look on Erika herself if she were present (Mizuki was allowed to do so, but no one else). Then again, he could never get used to Mikihiko being called "Miki", so this must be what it means by "what goes around, comes around".

……Tatsuya shook his head to dispel the random thoughts and replied with "I didn't ask you guys to return it" in response to Mayumi's question.

"I'll be blunt. If the reason for keeping the Parasites turns out to be something other than experimentation and that their usage as military tools is discovered, hereby having a negative effect on Magicians, I will ensure that the organization responsible pays dearly for this."

"Quite the terrifying declaration."

Though the voice contained some degree of surprise, her gaze seemed to signify an unspeakable hatred towards that sort of talk.

"After taking into the consideration what is happening in the USNA, such a threat is necessary."

Mayumi also knew that discrimination against Magicians was growing worse day by day over there. If a similar situation broke out in the much smaller Japan, things might turn into bloodshed at a much faster rate.

"……I understand. I will talk to my father, but I cannot guarantee anything, so please don't be too hopeful. After all, unlike Juumonji-kun, I'm not the heir to the Saegusa Family."

Mayumi's last words threw Tatsuya for a loop.

"……What?"

"No…… It's just that it's surprising that the Saegusa Family turned out to be so patriarchal."

"What is Tatsuya-kun's family like?"

This may be because she was shy or simply being sulky. Tatsuya was a little unclear about the meaning behind Mayumi's reaction.

Still, there was no reason to answer. After reflecting briefly, Tatsuya approached Mayumi's question in a state of mind much like someone playing a penalty game.

"Our father's influence isn't something that is a part of our lives, since he currently moved into his second wife's condo."

Mayumi's eyes started to drift all over the place.

Seeing such an innocent side of Mayumi that was so easily flustered by something like this, Tatsuya couldn't help but think that she's not that much older than we are. Though she often acts like an adult, she definitely couldn't be called a "mature woman".

"The only difference is that she's not a lover but a second wife now."

"How mature."

"That's just giving up. And if being an adult means 'giving up'…… Then I don't even want to think about it."

Tatsuya answered Mayumi with a completely defeated tone.

Even a bad premonition will occasionally miscalculate.

In regards to Tatsuya's theory about the JSDF Intelligence Department using the Parasite, that was sadly not going to happen.

Still, it was hard to say whether this constituted being "fortunate".

The next morning.

"The Counterintelligence 3rd Division's espionage detention center was raided. The captured Parasites have been executed."

That was what was written on the message Mayumi passed along.

Chapter 16

—The Intelligence Bureau's facilities were attacked, and the contained Parasites had been killed—

Tatsuya suppressed the urge to immediately contact Mayumi for a detailed report. Instead he went to the bathroom for the time being. Rinsing off the sweat from his regular training under the shower, he considered his next move.

Miyuki still hadn't been told.

He had just come back from Yakumo's temple. This was perfectly routine, and just because he had checked his mail before entering the shower she shouldn't have inferred anything from it.

(No..... It'd be useless to try and hide it.)

Should he just keep quiet, Tatsuya considered, then immediately rejected the idea.

He wouldn't be able to keep anything from his sister's sharp intuition very long. And it would be one thing if it was completely unrelated, but Miyuki was just as involved in this matter as Tatsuya was.

Deciding to not sneak around and openly come clean with his sister, Tatsuya exited the shower.

Tatsuya's fingers flew over the console of the workstation in the basement. If it were to be described in words, it wouldn't be 'brilliant', but 'accurate', and 'fast', rather like his personality.

It was a Saturday, so they only had a few morning classes. But Tatsuya had considered skipping if the investigation ended up dragging out.

In that case, it would be something natural for him (he himself considered it to be 'natural').

In Miyuki's case, it would be something natural for her, as well (to her, however, it would be more due to 'necessity'), and since skipping today would have been entirely of her own free will, she had wavered until the last minute.

Fortunately, he found the data they were looking for immediately.

Although he was accessing the Defense Forces server without being authorized, the resistance of the local system (local here meaning, not standalone, but merely localized) against the hacking program made by the 'Electron Sorceress' Fujibayashi Kyouko was decidedly inadequate. Compartmentalizing information in this way as a risk countermeasure meant that, whilst specific sections may be vulnerable, leaks would not impact the whole. It had both merits and demerits.

Well, since it had led to a favorable result for Tatsuya this time, he could afford to be graceful.

The video which was recorded therein contained something shocking.

Not in the sense of ruthlessness or cruelty causing a physiological impact, but that the identity of the one who had gone and caused everything had a considerable impact on the siblings.

Under the cover of darkness, a petite figure invaded.

Illuminated by the light of the alarms was a masked, flaming haired girl.

With a single glare of her golden eyes, the plain clothed soldiers were blown away, then she proceeded to carve a complicated pattern four times towards the door. As she then stepped aside, the door crashed down.

On the other side was a small room. The width was about enough to fit two single beds, and the low ceiling was 2 meters tall. On the far side were three bunk beds.

Deprived of movement, in a straitjacket, legs tightly bound, a man was lying on top of the third bed. While he looked different due to being completely pale, his face was unmistakably that of the Parasite who had identified himself as Marte.

A pale mist emitted from the girl's mouth. It seemed the room was kept rather cold.

In her hand, the knife had been replaced by an automatic pistol.

The single shot she fired hit Marte right in the chest.

All of a sudden, the man's body combusted.

The source of the flame had likely been the bullet. It was probably a magic which blazed on the condition the bullet stopped inside the target's body.

The flame haired girl, Angie Sirius, fired more shots into the top and bottom beds. Clearly, this was a killing with no regard for recovering the 'content'. The objective had been not merely to erase the 'container'; it was an 'execution'.

While watching the girl calmly walk away off the camera, Tatsuya sighed unconsciously.

He knew that Sirius' tasks included the neutralisation of rogue magicians. He also knew perfectly well that humane treatment for magicians was all just empty talk, but he couldn't help sighing nonetheless.

The entire affair was highly unfortunate.

Inflicting the role of a merciless killer on a 16 year old girl, just what were the USNA military brass thinking.

Even the Mafia was more considerate in their personnel selection. This was no different from religious and fundamentalist nuts who drove boys and girls to terrorism in the name of holy war.

"Onii-sama, that was..... Lina wasn't it?"

Miyuki had been informed of Sirius' secret, 'Parade'.

She could tell from that rough image that the killer was Sirius— Lina.

"Probably."

Miyuki seemed to be in shock, but Tatsuya could find no words to soothe her.

There was nothing he could say about the murder itself. He didn't believe he was qualified to do any such thing. He himself had undertaken missions he could not reveal, and amongst the dirty work to be done, assassination could be said to be one of the cleaner acts.

At the same time, however, it was lonely and dismal work.

Unless there was a great compatibility in terms of personality, it would be far too heavy for a teenage girl. Unable to bear the weight, her heart would break down little by little.

And from what Tatsuya had seen, Lina was no killer.

From the voice and look Miyuki gave him, she was of the same opinion.

At this rate, there may come a time when she is lost to the darkness.

Fortunately(?), what happened next was further shocking enough to blow such melancholy away. All of a sudden, another figure walked into the monitor screen of the Third Counterintelligence Division's video server Tatsuya was hacking into.

With blond hair and blue eyes, the young man appeared to be an Anglo-Saxon. He looked childish, but his age was probably around that of Tatsuya's.

Holding her hands to her mouth Miyuki let out a sound of dismay, but Tatsuya remained calm.

This workstation had been intended for hacking, and was completely isolated from the other systems as well as running on a dedicated line. There were no mics in the room, nor cameras. Sound and visuals could only flow one way, so there was no way of observing this place from the other side of the connection.

"Hello, you can hear me right? I'll speak on the assumption you can."

Sure enough, the youth reflected in the monitor began to speak without attempting to establish communication.

"Let's start off with introductions. My name is Raymond Sage Clark. One of the 'Seven Sages'."

Miyuki's hands, which had at some point found their way to Tatsuya's shoulders, tensed.

Tatsuya was aware that the sensation included tenseness of his own.

"I've heard about you from Tear[3]..... No, Shizuku. Nice to meet you, Tatsuya."

It seemed this boy was a fellow student of Shizuku in her exchange.

Furthermore, someone she had provided information to.

If Shizuku's information source had been Lina's mentioned 'Sage', it was of little wonder that even off-record information could be accessed.

But, just what was his purpose?

Going as far as to expose himself to Tatsuya.

There was always the possibility it was a video dummy, but Tatsuya's intuition told him it was the real Raymond Sage Clark.

"Let's speak bluntly. ..... Ah, that's a pretty nice phrase."

Raymond was speaking Japanese. 'Speak bluntly' was fluent, if not a bit incorrect. There was nothing 'blunt' about his speaking anyway.

"The one who told Angie Sirius about this place was me."

Tatsuya reflexively wanted to point out 'your use of the idiom is completely wrong', but there was no way to convey that unfortunately.

There was no doubt that 'this place' referred to the Third Counterintelligence Division.

"Since before I said anything, she already knew about this place, anyway."

The hell is that, Tatsuya thought. You're not telling someone anything if they already knew.

Once again, there was no opportunity to retort. Tatsuya decided to see the video through to the end.

"And now, I've got something special for you."

'Exclusive news' was pretty informal Japanese. It was as if he had been learning Japanese from some news room.

"I think it's something you'll be quite interested in. The price is my repayment to you for watching, is what I'd like to say, but since we're wrapping up I'll give it to you for free."

Although Tatsuya knew he couldn't hear, he still muttered 'it's not like I asked you' under his breath.

That was all he had time to spare for that, however.

"The anti-magician movement currently raging in the States, which is about to spill over into Japan, was orchestrated by one of the Seven Sages: Jiedo Sage Heigu."

Being hit with this news all of a sudden, even Tatsuya couldn't suppress his surprise.

"Jiedo Heigu, aka Gù Jié[4]. A stateless Chinese, and leader of the international terrorist organisation 'Blanche'. The boss of that Blanche Japan branch leader whom you caught, Tsukasa."

As the names lined up one after the other,

"He was also the previous leader of the international crime syndicate 'No Head Dragon', and his grandson Richard is a senior in that same group. Within the organisation he is referred to as the 'Black Sage', or 'Lord Heigu[5]'."

Tatsuya was transfixed to the screen.

"Ah, so you know, just because we're both Sages doesn't mean we have any connection to each other. The Seven Sages isn't the name of some group, but rather refers to the seven operators who have access to Hliðskjálf."

It wasn't like conversation — questions were possible, yet he willed him to hurry up.

Hliðskjálf..... He had only heard a rumor of it once. It was a rumor, no more seemingly real than an urban legend, yet it was true, apparently. Was this the same thing as that which he had heard in the rumor?

"Hliðskjálf is-"

With impeccable timing as if reading Tatsuya's thoughts, Raymond proceeded to describe it.

"An additional extension of the global observation system 'Echelon III'. It's a backdoor into Echelon III, so I suppose you could think of it as a hacking tool which allows you to lurk within the system? What would you say Tatsuya?"

'What would you say' he asks, even though there wasn't the slightest chance of an answer.

Of course Raymond was perfectly aware of that as well, so he continued without waiting for one.

"As for where Hliðskjálf itself is located, not even us operators know. It may even be that it's simply a program, with no physical hardware to be found."

Raymond shrugged on screen. The gesture looked like it came straight out of some anime.

"Anyway, Hliðskjálf collects information from all over the world with an efficiency surpassing Echelon III's main system and brings it to the operators. The operators seem to be chosen by the system itself, and there seems to be no discernible selection criteria. Apparently it's completely random."

Raymond mimicked twirling a pipe. He was probably rather disappointed he had forgotten to bring an actual prop.

"To try and think of something they have in common, I suppose it'd be the financial security to access advanced information systems on their own? It's not like you'd need to be a millionaire or something, in terms of Japan or the States something along the lines of the standard of living of an average middle class would be enough."

This was completely unbelievable.

That was Tatsuya's impression from Raymond's explanation so far.

Just what were the creators of Hliðskjálf thinking. It was inconceivable that they were merely hackers doing this for the pleasure of it.

"Well to be honest, it's not much of a system. Hardware wise Hliðskjálf is completely dependent on Echelon III, and it's merely the data processing which is more efficient; it can't access data which is in storage since it's merely an interception system. By the way, there's a system guard in place which prevents saving any of the results to some external storage. The information which can be obtained is limited by the brain of the operator. At best, it's something which grants information gathering capabilities, and allows its operators to take the name of 'Sage'."

Even with just that though, it was a serious threat.

It could be said now that all data of importance was moved through a network of some kind.

Just, what data was there which wasn't communicated at least once.

"Not to mention, using Hliðskjálf poses a risk to its operators. In order to streamline the search, Hliðskjálf uses two agents: Huginn and Muninn. The search history of the operator is recorded in Muninn. Anything one operator

searches for will be known to all the other operators. The reason I know of Jiedo Heigu is due to Muninn."

At this point, Tatsuya thought 'Oh my'. Theoretically speaking, that would mean it was possible the identity of Raymond Clark was known to Jiedo Heigu as well.

"Due to the loss of the Japanese branches of both Blanche and No Head Dragon, Heigu lost the means to meddle with Japan. The reason Heigu sent the Parasites to Japan was to cause an escalating turmoil, under cover of which he could rebuild his bases of operations."

In the video, Raymond had dropped his performance. It seemed this was a serious matter to him.

"I have come to the conclusion that his aim is the elimination of magic from society. If he can push out magic technology, magically underdeveloped countries like the Great Asian Alliance can even the balance of military power at a stretch. They would be dominant in a non-magical world, and I believe that is what Heigu and those who are behind him are plotting."

Although seemingly overdramatic, Tatsuya concluded it was logical as a whole. It had been Tatsuya's own feeling that the Great Asian Alliance seemed to want to eradicate magic technology.

"That is not a world I desire. .....It's fine if you laugh and call me a romanticist, but I truly believe that magic is something which will lead to the advancement of mankind."

Although he knew there was no way the other side could hear, Tatsuya couldn't help a spit-take. Somehow, a fundamental part of the boy just didn't seem to match with that opinion.

"And so, from here on out, I'll try and continue providing information you may find necessary. Tatsuya Shiba — Strategic class magician, 'The Destroy'(God of Destruction)."

At that exaggerated nickname Raymond bestowed upon him, Tatsuya frowned with all his might.

—Don't give me a name that sounds like the boss of some crappy video game. Was it possible that this boy was an 'otaku' of universal language.

"We may have gone juust a bit over time. To summarize, for this matter I will offer my help in the destruction of the Parasites."

Hardly just a bit, Tatsuya thought, but the monitor didn't switch off.

"About the information on Jiedo Heigu. It's up to you if you'll believe it or not. Whether you'll trust what I'm about to tell you right now is up to you as well. If you do however, I'd like you to repay me by completing a few tasks."

For a moment, Raymond was silent. Not in the sense of dramaticism, but more likely due to tension, from what was reflected in the screen.

"Tomorrow, the night of February 19th your time, all active Parasites will be drawn to the back outdoor training grounds of First High. I'd like you to destroy them there."

No evidence had been presented, but by this stage Tatsuya was already prepared to take Raymond up on his offer.

"You should note that I've already relayed this information to Angie Sirius as well. Whether to cooperate or not, is once again all up to you."

He wasn't particularly thrilled about this gesture of consideration, but unfortunately there wasn't exactly any way to object either.

Raymond spoke no further, then the monitor suddenly went dark.

An exhalation was heard overhead.

Miyuki appeared to have been holding her breath.

Tatsuya had been too.

"Seems that we'd better leave soon if we don't want to be late."

Rising and looking back, Tatsuya called Miyuki along.

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Year 1 Class E's 2pm class was practical.

Although it was called a class, as usual there was no teacher present. Students just operated their CADs on their own following guidance shown on the wall monitors. The students themselves were already familiar with this, and there was now an ease due to being free from a teacher's eyes. Of course there were those who simply gave up; whether one did so or continued persevering was up to the individual.

Most of the boys kept it up.

In order to keep from raising any attention Leo, who was delayed in arriving to the practice room, looked around and, seeing the figures of Mikihiko, Erika, and Mizuki, he proceeded inside.

"..... You're late, Leo."

"Quiet you."

While Mikihiko's voice had softened considerably as of late, his reproof contained a hint of sharpness; Leo responded with a fearless grin.

That grin soon switched to an 'oh?' expression.

"What about Tatsuya?"

To his inquiry, Mizuki replied "It seems he has a visitor?"

Her tone was rather questioning since Mizuki was unsure as well.

"Visitor? At school?"

As Leo echoed with raised eyebrows, Mizuki could only return a vague smile.

"More importantly, let's get this over with."

Erika spoke up from the side in a carefree voice. Discernible underneath her indifferent tone was a warning not to step into private matters.

"You're right. Today's task seems like it'll be quite challenging."

Saying so, Mikihiko began setting his CAD. Erika considered it someone else's business, Mizuki was slightly anxious, and Leo felt a slight twinge; their smiles each contained their own respective feelings.

Meanwhile Tatsuya, with his moody pokerface, was sitting on a sofa in the drawing room.

Across from him sat a middle-aged man in a luxury suit. His expression was plain moody.

As these two displeased visages faced each other, it was unlikely either would attempt a conversation.

The one who ran out of patience first, having being forcibly called out of class, was Tatsuya.

"Aoki-san, would you please state your business?"

His tone couldn't be said to be polite, nevermind his wording; the temper evident in Aoki's face seemed to step up a notch.

Aoki as well, since it was Tatsuya, couldn't help letting his feelings show. As the one who dealt with the underground economy and guarded the Yotsuba treasury for over ten years, Aoki's mask shouldn't have a single crack, nevermind going as far as to impair his speech.

Aoki should have known more than anyone how letting his emotions out like this would impair his mission. But the hierarchy of the Yotsuba had been too deeply ingrained into him,

Such consciousness had turned no few people into idiots.

"..... I'm in the middle of class at the moment, so if there's nothing important I will excuse myself."

"Wait."

At Tatsuya's ultimatum, Aoki finally opened his mouth. Considerably reluctantly too.

"The other day, you purchased a 3H-P94, did you not?"

The business-like way of speaking Aoki adopted was understandable. Tatsuya found it humorous, but didn't laugh. Such petty retaliation was, in all likelihood, just his way of coping.

"To be exact, it was the day before yesterday."

In the same way, Tatsuya responded in a business-like manner. Unfortunately, his resolve would be lost almost immediately.

"The madam wants it. We'll reimburse you twice the amount, so please hand it over immediately."

Tatsuya rapidly stood up, and confirmed with a sharp gaze there were no eavesdroppers.

Since there was always equipment for the observation of magical power in magic high schools he could not use his 'Eyes' freely, but his naked eyes were also trained for such a feat. In any case, there had been no one listening in to their talk.

Tatsuya took out from his pocket his mobile terminal, and connected a cable into it, holding out the other end to Aoki.

Thinking about it — no, even if you didn't this was pretty presumptuous behavior, but realizing Tatsuya wasn't about to say anything, Aoki with a frown nonetheless took the cable and plugged it into his own terminal.

"Aoki-san, are you sick?"

The first message he sent over was this unexpected thing.

Aoki's reflexive reaction was to get angry, but sensing the unusual pressure emitting from the other side he inadvertently kept himself under control.

"Today is a Saturday. If you had waited just four more hours you could have called me somewhere with no people. Why would you run the risk of discussing House matters in the drawing room of a public school? I'm sure you know it's an order from my Aunt that my links with the family are to be kept absolutely secret."

Large cracks began to appear in Aoki's mask of calm. The edge of his lips was trembling finely. His complexion was also pale.

Tatsuya knew there must have been reasons for such carelessness. Avoiding places Miyuki would be, preserving hierarchy, all could account for such unreasonableness.

Aoki should have realized Tatsuya would see through all that. And yet, the movement of his pen as he wrote a reply was the only answer.

"I would just like to carry out madam's orders as soon as possible. More importantly, please bring out the 3H right now. I can leave straight after."

"There's no way I can do that. Even if I transferred ownership to you, the loan agreement with First High would still be in effect. The reason I bought the 3H-P94 in the first place was to prevent it from being taken away by a third party. I will take responsibility for it myself. Please tell Aunt that."

Aoki's face shifted from red to blue. This generally signaled an incoming tantrum.

"Are you going to disobey your orders?"

At Tatsuya's stinging words however, Aoki deflated.

Seeing this change in him, Tatsuya stood up. He judged that there was no longer any reason for him to remain.

"Wait. No, please wait."

It seemed Aoki didn't intend to leave just yet.

Looking closely, the arrogance, which had earlier filled his face, no, his entire body had disappeared. Tatsuya didn't think for a moment he was having some sort of existential revelation. Looking in his eyes however, his attitude had completely changed.

"I apologise sincerely for my conduct earlier."

Saying so, Aoki bowed low to Tatsuya. He was still seated on the couch, but there was no misunderstanding that he really was apologising.

"Please raise your head, Aoki-san."

As he spoke, Tatsuya returned to his seat. It didn't mean he was responding to Aoki's sincerity. In the first place, Tatsuya didn't feel much sincerity at all. However, he was interested in what Aoki had to say which would cause him to become so serious.

"Tatsuya-kun, rather, Tatsuya-dono, it's exactly as you say. Since the loan agreement was a prerequisite for the purchase, it stands to reason that you cannot just take it away. I'm sorry for asking something so unreasonable."

"It's fine."

As Aoki bowed again, Tatsuya inclined his head to match. He replied with just that because what Aoki had stated was so obvious, anything he said could end up being construed as sarcasm. In any case, the fact that he didn't consider it a problem anymore seemed to have been conveyed to Aoki, who raised his head without prompting this time.

"I would just like you to understand this. Madam isn't asking for your 3H because she's taken some fancy to it. It seems she thinks it'd be necessary for some kind of research."

"I understand."

"I won't impose on you any further. Again, I realize you must feel the need to keep that near at hand. If at any point you feel like letting go of it however, please consider handing it over to madam. In that case, I will of course provide appropriate compensation."

It wasn't hard reading the lines behind Aoki's proposal. It seemed whatever the case, his Aunt didn't want Pixie falling into someone else's hands.

"If you're willing to accept, we will be happy to provide the promised amount, plus an additional 10% of what you spend every year."

"Every year?"

He didn't think they'd go this far. It was still only a drop in the bucket for the Yotsuba, but from global rates it was a princely sum.

"Yes, every year. Specifically, we would like to make a contractual conditional purchase reservation with you which automatically renews every year."

Not just a verbal promise, but even a contract. Both to Tatsuya, and the Yotsuba, 10% of the purchase amount was peanuts. The purpose of the contract then was more for Tatsuya to keep his end of the bargain.

In other words, claiming ownership. It was an offer behind which the seriousness of the Yotsuba — of Maya could be glimpsed.

"As I'm sure you know, I'm still a minor."

"I will relay things to your father."

Meaning that Aoki would sort through the legal details himself.

"Got it. I don't mind."

There was no disadvantage in Aoki's proposal for Tatsuya. Rather than further harming his image in the view of his obstinate Aunt, it'd be better to make a compromise here, Tatsuya thought.

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Having accompanied Aoki all the way to the entrance, Tatsuya went back to the practice rooms. Although half of the two hour class had passed already, he felt that he should still be able to make attendance.

His feet stopped however before he entered the corridor.

"Lina."

The face of the transfer student, whom he hadn't seen for a while, was notably worse for wear. There were no physical cues such as gaunt cheeks or bags under the eyes visible. It was impossible to find any sign of adverse health.

But her luster was gone. She was holding on to her usual act, and someone who knew little about her would have been fooled yet by her utterly gorgeous looks. But someone who was familiar with her — even if only to Tatsuya's degree — would notice the absence of the overflowing spirit which had truly made her shine, and the difference was palpable.

It seemed the mental fatigue was stacking up.

She must be under immense pressure.

Now however the shadows added a frail transience to her beauty, and increased her charm in a different way from usual. Even Tatsuya who normally took little interest in a girl's appearance — or rather, was utterly accustomed to them, couldn't help but feel admiration.

"Tatsuya."

Nonetheless, it wasn't to the point his reactions were delayed.

At his name being called, he adjusted his gaze to look into those sapphire eyes.

"Did you hear?"

"Yeah."

They were talking about the information obtained from the Sage. The one which said that tomorrow night, the Parasites would be led to the outdoor training grounds in the back. Their words were brief, but the intent was fully received by both of them.

"Do you know who it was?"

"No."

So it appeared he had not shown Lina his face, Tatsuya inferred from that answer. It made sense. If the USNA army became aware of the Sage's identity, they would stop at nothing to hunt down that veritable fount of knowledge.

"I see, that's a pity."

"I suppose. Not that it matters."

Cutting to the chase, Lina looked at Tatsuya with challenging eyes.

"Tatsuya."

Firm and bright.

A gaze with as strong a will as that night they were killing each other.

"I will not hold back."

He already knew, but Tatsuya found himself realizing again. Regardless of his own preference, an alliance had not been an option from the very beginning.

"I know. The worlds we live in are completely separate after all."

Tatsuya's answer was a classic (old fashioned) line often found in romance novels (or movies), synonymous with a farewell.

The reason he chose such an easily misunderstood line was because of those secretly listening in.

Lina visibly swallowed her retort. With just a little delay, she seemed to have noticed Tatsuya's intention.

Some color however had returned to Lina's pale complexion. Somehow, Tatsuya felt that the red now dying her cheeks held a different meaning from before.

"Such an idiot!"

Spitting those words out, she spun around on her heels,

And it was impossible to tell whether she was simply playing along with Tatsuya's act,

Or if those had been Lina's true feelings.

Tatsuya was clear of one thing now however.

—With a sigh of acceptance, he resigned himself to a detention practical after school.

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Yotsuba main house.

As Hayama served afternoon tea, an electronic sound denoted an incoming call. Seeing Maya's nod, Hayama picked up the classic voice communication terminal and pressed it to his ear.

"Aoki. .....So, you failed. .....It is a fact it seems you were unable to carry out Madam's orders. Well, such circumstances cannot be helped. .....I do not believe there is any hurry. Tatsuya-dono is unlikely to change his

agreement over something of this degree. .....Very well. I shall inform Madam. .....Good work."

".....What news from Aoki-san?"

After Hayama set down the terminal, Maya asked. With a look of not wishing to have to convey unpleasant news, Hayama bowed to Maya.

"Apologies, Madam. We were unable to procure the 3H."

The failure had been Aoki's. But as the head butler, Hayama could be said to be Aoki's superior. Aoki's bungle was his shame to bear.

Maya's answer held neither forgiveness nor reproach.

"Tatsuya-san's name had come up."

What she took interest in was this point.

"Tatsuya-dono had purchased the 3H."

As Hayama answered, a wry smile appeared on his face.

"Apparently Tatsuya-dono did not wish for it to fall into the hands of others. He has entered into an ownership lend-lease agreement with First High."

Still, that had been the next best alternative had Maya not been able to get ahold of Pixie itself.

".....I wonder if he knew. Or was it just coincidence?"

"I do not know."

Maya's expression was slightly puzzled. But she immediately cleared her mind.

".....Well, if Tatsuya-san can take good care of it I don't mind."

"Aoki has said that if Tatsuya-dono ever decides to let go of it, we are contracted to purchase it."

"Yes, that would be good."

Hayama faced Maya and bowed lightly. Although Maya had not blamed Aoki, much less Hayama from the beginning, he nonetheless showed his gratitude for her leniency towards the mismanagement.

"Still, it really would have been nice to have a sample on hand....."

At Maya's mutter Hayama, with a look suggesting 'we should just leave things be' spoke up.

"Madam, I'm sure there is no need for me to say this, but it's best to have as little as possible to do with those creatures."

Maya's ironic smile was a reminder she was lovely still.

"Because they're rather distasteful?"

"As you will."

"They're very important sponsors after all."

At Maya's sly smile, Hayama frowned.

"I know what you want to say, Hayama-san. I have no intention of causing discord. I only do this because I believe that obtaining a 'Parasite' is necessary for the Yotsuba."

"Does Madam believe then that studying the Parasite will bring us closer to the mysteries of Mental Interference?"

"Yes. 'Just what exactly is the mind' is a question the Yotsuba have been endlessly pursuing. It's said that the Parasites are individual mental information bodies. Information on substance, structure, location.....even if only a little, it should give us hints as to the true nature of the mind."

Understanding Maya's reasoning, Hayama bowed.

Maya returned to the original topic.

"By the way, what are the movements of the other spirits?"

"According to the report from Kuroba-dono earlier, the spirits which were purged yesterday night have already been resurrected."

"Already? That's quite early."

"There must have been a reason for the rush. Kuroba reported it seemed the spirits were preparing for battle."

"I see.....any idea about whom against?"

Floating on Maya's face as she queried Hayama was a barely repressed smile.

"Judging from their modus operandi, they will be aiming for their compatriot trapped in the doll."

"At this point it's not so much that trouble finds him, but almost as though he goes after trouble himself."

Needless to say, Maya's words referred to her nephew. The person in question would no doubt violently protest that, but here there was no one who voiced dissent.

"Do you know when it will happen?"

"Kuroba-dono anticipates it will be tomorrow night, around First High school."

"It would still be prudent to keep an eye on the surroundings then.....all right, please organise a group. The leader can be.....Ayako-chan should be fine. The goal isn't a fight after all."

"Certainly."

Hayama clapped his hands, calling for a maid to serve Maya in his place, before heading towards the communications room to relay Maya's orders.

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Although it was not a relatively late hour, Saegusa Mayumi was an examinee.

Today was February 18th, Saturday. One more week until the entrance exams for magic university. Her chances of not making it were practically zero, yet nonetheless it was a fact she had little time for much else.

That the 'vampire incidents' had seemingly subsided for now was good news for her mental state.

Making up on her weak areas in the school library, by the time she returned home the day had almost passed.

Being welcomed back by a slightly timid young servant, Mayumi immediately noticed.

"Is Father back?"

"Yes, m'lady."

Being well trained the maid didn't fumble her words or the like, but Mayumi could perceive that what had frightened her was her father.

(To scare a young girl like this.....Father, just what are you doing?)

Although she felt irritation in her heart, to display it would only disturb the staff more.

"Alright."

Mayumi smiled at the maid, then proceeded to her own room.

At that time in his study, the household head Saegusa Koichi turned a face filled with ill-concerned frustration to his confidant Nakura.

".....So you're saying the one who invaded and killed the Parasite the Third Counterintel division had captured was the Stars' Sirius?"

"There is little doubt."

In the face of his master's anger, there was no trace of fear in Nakura's face. While he was courteous, unlike the interactions between Hayama and Maya, there was a business-like aspect to be found. Nakura was not a family member of the Saegusa, and would be more aptly described as a mercenary. He was not inextricably bound to Koichi's side.

Sometimes he was assigned as a guard for children, such as with Mayumi, or sometimes sent to accomplish missions which lay outside the law such as intel gathering. That was how he was treated by Koichi, as an Extra number.

"But even for the Stars' Sirius, for them to simply waltz in and kill the prisoner so easily is too much. The Intel division wasn't slacking off either. Could your source have been mistaken?"

As Koichi spoke with disgust, Nakura calmly rebutted.

"The Intel division of the defence forces is by no means incompetent. Had we been the ones to attempt an infiltration of the Third Counterintel division's building, we would not have found the security to be lacking. Rather, it's simply that the Stars are just that good. There's a reason

they're known as the most powerful force of magicians in the world to date."

Being spoken to as if being chided as a child, Koichi's expression became increasingly sullen. Not to the point of losing it and yelling at Nakura however.

"Sir, if I may be so bold, I believe it's time we cut our losses. The benefits of the Saegusa's continued involvement in this diminish by the day."

"......You're right."

Koichi calmly considered Nakura's calm advice.

"It seems the Kudou are also moving in this matter. I had considered asking them to supplement our depleted forces, but pulling out may be for the best."

"As you say."

"Tell our dispatched members to return to their normal duties. Nakura, dismissed."

"Excuse me."

As Koichi began operating an encrypted communication terminal by himself, Nakura left the study.

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AD 2096, February 19th, Sunday.

Eight Parasites would be moving. Tatsuya did not unilaterally trust this information from across the sea.

He had endlessly researched regarding a boy named Raymond Clark amongst the students in Shizuku's exchange school.

The face on the photo stored in the school server was the same as that which had appeared in the video.

But that alone did not guarantee Raymond Clark was telling the truth. Just as you would not dismiss all anonymously supplied information as false,

you wouldn't trust all information just because it had been supplied by someone who gave their true identity.

Nonetheless Tatsuya had gone over to the specified location--the outdoor training field of First High. This was because he had no other significant leads.

He waited, leaving things in the hands of chance. Even if it ended up being false and he wasted the day, it wasn't a big deal.

In the exceptionally large grounds behind the school was an artificial forest. Technically it was also part of First High, but it was difficult to tell where the artificial forest came to an end and the natural forest began. Especially so at night.

The time was nearly 7pm. Maybe it didn't quite qualify as night yet.

Unlike in the inner city however where bright lights eclipsed the darkness, in this forest with no street lamps in sight it wouldn't be wrong to think it was nearing nightfall.

To prevent trespassers entering by mistake, a high fence surrounded the training grounds. If a normal citizen wandered in and was hit by magic shot during training, it would be all kinds of problematic.

However, even without the fence, it was unlikely any locals would enter. It was well known in the neighbourhood that this was the practice field of First High.

Besides, there were no households around unrelated to the magic high school. When First High had been established here, the government had offered compensation for residence transfer to all those who were unrelated to magic, who couldn't use magic, or who wanted nothing to do with magic. All those who remained knew very well the risk of setting foot in that field.

That was also why there was no particular security system. There was nothing to steal considering it was just an artificial forest, so there was no pressing need to keep out intruders.

"Can you get over it?"

Looking up at the three meter high fence, Tatsuya asked his companions. The only direct entrance in was a back gate from First High, so having exited the school the only way in was scaling the fence. Entering from

outside was simple, but entering from inside would require dealing with the school's difficult to deceive monitoring system. While systems were of course in place to detect thieves entering from the training grounds, if suspicious people entered not only from outside but inside as well there would be far more cause to investigate.

"Of course, Onii-sama."

"No problem."

"Something like this'll be a piece of cake!"

At Tatsuya's words Miyuki, Erika and Leo replied in the affirmative.

"It is possible."

Last of all, the one to whom the question had originally been posed to, Pixie, answered.

Tatsuya's companions tonight were these three, and one doll. —Originally, Tatsuya had not planned on bringing Miyuki. Erika as well, since she had been involved thus far, had only been supposed to be informed of events.

But he knew that knowing about such events, there was no way they'd simply wait quietly at home. When leaving, Miyuki had tagged along as if it were only natural, and at the specified time Erika had casually just turned up; at both these times Tatsuya had not protested. He knew that resistance would only be a pointless exercise in futility. Rather he had given up, and immediately set about incorporating his friends into his strategy.

Turning his focus to the training grounds again, he felt the air of the forest stir. The other players seemed to have ascended to the stage already.

Whilst pretending to operate his CAD — he didn't forget to maintain confidentiality at this stage — he pulled the sequence for 'Leap' from his memory and jumped over the fence.

Amongst the shadows of the forest, the four + one moved as a single entity. They did not spread out to search for the target. In an area of this size, in this darkness, separating would have little benefit and only run the risk of them being defeated individually.

Even if that hadn't been the case, it had been proven in Aoyama that regrouping under such circumstances would be an arduous task. It wasn't

impossible that the opponents wouldn't be coming out on alert, but even so there was no sense risking it. If they couldn't find the Parasites like this, they would simply come back tomorrow and search steadily again.

Not to mention, Tatsuya had the feeling that they would appear.

It was not a prediction.

Nor an inference.

Although he had no basis, Tatsuya was certain as he clove through the trees. The light of their torches only illuminated a small part of the ground, but there was no one who stumbled amidst the dead branches and tree roots. Possibly because there were no new tracks, whilst straining their eyes they simply proceeded on at the same pace as if it were day, for about 15 minutes.

"Tatsuya-san, please stop."

From the communications device fitted to his ear, the voice of Mizuki came through. In conference mode, the words reached all of their headsets.

"38 degrees to the right of your current direction, I can see the aura of Parasites."

Instead of accompanying Tatsuya and the others, Mizuki was on a rooftop overlooking the training grounds providing navigation with her 'eyes'.

"I see them too! Two men and a woman, three in total."

Using the aura Mizuki had spotted, Honoka's magic applied to a camera activated. The image aquired via optical magic was as clear as those taken from close range in broad daylight, and was delivered to the group's terminals via wireless.

If not for the unique talents Mizuki and Honoka possessed as magicians, a search scheme of this type would be impossible. Having determined that their utility was indispensable to the mission tonight, Mikihiko had been assigned as an escort for the two. Mikihiko himself had not been unhappy with this placement. He understood full well how important his role was, and knew that he was perfectly suited for the job.

"Ah! From the opposite direction, a masked girl is approaching the Parasites!"

Honoka's report rang in. With the Parasite's aura becoming visible, it seemed Lina had sprung the attack.

Tatsuya signalled with his hands. Miyuki, Erika, Leo, and Pixie nodded.

The next moment, Tatsuya became a gale blazing through the forest.

Erika followed right behind him whilst Leo, checking side to side, started running with Miyuki and Pixie.

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Tatsuya's group, the band of Parasites, as well as Lina and her backup team.

Gathered in this forest right now were these three forces, both Tatsuya and Lina thought.

Tatsuya knew that there was a faction in the defense forces who wished to capture a Parasite, but he recognised they were under the influence of the Saegusa. Being warned through Mayumi, with the Yotsuba undoubtedly moving to keep them in check and having received a large blow from 'Angie Sirius', Tatsuya determined that they should be in pretty bad shape. At least, they would be in no condition to interfere tonight.

In fact, however, under the shade of the trees, a different group approached both Tatsuya and Lina.

They were a guerrilla infantry platoon of the defense forces First division, specialising in close combat, known as the 'Sword Corps'. As the name implied they did not use firearms, but were a group which launched surprise attacks using sword type devices.

Their mobilisation was due to a range of circumstances, what with Tokyo being under the First division's jurisdiction, the nature of the mission requiring covert action, as well as them being under the influence of the Kudou. No, that last reason may have been the biggest of all.

Tatsuya was not omniscient. Something unknown couldn't be calculated for, and naturally the wrong response would result. That the Kudou elder would be interested in the Parasites as weapons, and that he could assemble a force in only three days, was not something he could have have known.

And furthermore, there was another. Rather, one more person.

One shadow, tracking the Sword Corps.

Now, within the training grounds of First High, these five powers raced towards their inevitable collision.

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As the Stars captain 'Sirius', the mission must be fulfilled.

Underpinning Lina now was this pride alone.

It wasn't as if she had known no setbacks before coming to Japan. In the juvenile education program provided by the Pentagon, she had gotten only Cs in algebra and biology. In the combat class, within the same group, there were monstrously developed female soldiers of the same age who she just couldn't seem to beat. She had not done well in pilot training either.

But she had never once lost in magic.

The captain of Stars, Angie Sirius.

One of the most powerful magicians in the world.

Everyone had praised her, and she had supreme confidence in her skills herself.

But here in Japan.

She had lost to those siblings.

The first battle had been of her choosing.

Having withdrawn in her own time, it had been a 'successful retreat'.

The second time she had faltered in the face of Tatsuya's 'kamikaze' attack, and though she had lost to the ambush, even though strategically she was defeated she had not been bested by magic.

In the single combat with Miyuki which followed however, it was her defeat.

In spite of the adverse conditions, Lina did not think of them as an excuse.

In a head on clash, she had lost to Miyuki.

That defeat had further spurred her fighting spirit.

Unfazed, she had vowed vindication.

However,

In that fight for redemption,

Lina had been hammered by Tatsuya.

Luring him out into a one-on-one, even going as far as to pull out 'Brionac', she had still lost.

Even as she felt chagrin towards him, there was neither enmity nor resentment. Where Tatsuya had put Lina to shame was not in the speed of her restraint.

The fight itself had been very fair. Rather, she had the advantage.

She had lost to Tatsuya not just in terms of magic skill, but also in conviction……Lina accepted that.

But without a doubt, that defeat had shaken her to the core. She was one of the most powerful combat magicians in the world, Sirius.

Therefore she had been selected as the captain of Stars, the position which cared neither for age nor gender but was given to the USNA's strongest based on power alone. In the case said magician wasn't in the army, even if plotting and subterfuge was required they would be conscripted in as the Stars captain and 'Sirius'.

The chances of those defeats leaking out to the world at large was slim. In the first place both Tatsuya and Miyuki, as well as those who had accompanied them, were keeping quiet. Tarnishing the name of Sirius was not their goal.

Yet even if nothing was known to others, she had to face the fact she lost with dignity. In order to redeem herself, Lina had to demonstrate her abilities and fulfill her duties as 'Sirius'.

If she were to be able to continue as Sirius.

For the sake of the girl within her who was lost the moment she had taken the Sirius name, Angelina Shields.

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When Tatsuya had closed in enough to see with his own eyes he saw Lina: masked, flaming haired and golden eyed taking on the three Parasites alone.

Although the Parasites could cast magic without the need for activation sequences, merely thinking it into being, Lina wasn't giving an inch. In terms of attack ratio, Lina was dishing out seven blows for every three the Parasites managed to get in. If it weren't for one of the Parasites having a dangerous ability, the battle might have been even more skewed

The ability was pseudo-teleportation.

In terms of magic, it combined complex inertial dampening and high speed movement techniques.

By using the trees for mobility, it was possible to move in three dimensions, popping up and firing off magic.

The magic attacks held low interference power, and were nothing before Lina's magical might, yet she could not merely do nothing, and every time she raised defensive magic, some of the attacks from the other enemies would get through. Tatsuya judged the situation in an instant.

He had no intention of assisting Lina, but Tatsuya halted, and aimed 'Decomposition' at the Parasite using teleportation.

Many magicians aim magic using the five senses. Even when using perceptions outside the five, their aim would be the location of the target.

That was how it was normally.

Tatsuya however could aim at the information itself. Even if the location of the target changed rapidly, as long as the information itself was recognisable the aim would not be hindered.

The pseudo-teleportation had no effect on Tatsuya.

"Leave it to me!"

That wasn't just the case for Tatsuya however. Catching up to the now stationary Tatsuya, then passing him, Erika activated inertia control.

The pseudo-teleportation held a threat only if the opponent's hands, feet, and above all eyes could not keep up. On the other hand, if the opponent's speed exceeded that of the operator, such three-dimensional maneuvers were merely wasted acrobatics.

Erika grasped the Isori house-made and Tatsuya-adjusted (not that she asked him to) downsized version of 'Orochimaru', the integrated CAD armament 'Mizuchimaru', and accelerated straight ahead.

Her destination was exactly where the Parasite, who had just kicked off a tree trunk, would land.

With extraordinary dynamic vision, her body control not lost even under the effect of an inertial canceling technique, her footwork propelling her forwards without any wasted motions, she was able to calculate the exact moment the opponent would hit the ground.

In terms of magic power, the Parasite was probably ahead.

But Erika's might as a martial artist overturned the difference.

Erika swung Mizuchimaru.

Without an ounce of hesitation, the honed blade cut the Parasite down.

Tatsuya modified the aim of his partial decomposition, shooting out the limbs of another Parasite which was now aiming a telekinetic attack at Erika, and as she delivered the final blow he held out his left hand towards the fresh corpse.

Mikihiko would maintain a barrier which prevented the Parasites from exiting their hosts. He had set up a simple altar on the roof of the school building. The reason Mikihiko was positioned on the rooftop was not only to escort Mizuki and Honoka, but also because he could project remote barriers.

The effects of the barrier were imperfect however. It wasn't a matter of Mikihiko's skill, it was a fundamental flaw of the technique itself. Originally, barriers could not be constructed like this.

As long as the host survived, the Parasite could not flee from its vessel. In other words, once the hosts died the Parasites were free to escape. Even if they could secure the bodies, they could not contain the Parasites themselves. Before Erika fully killed the Parasite, it was necessary to process it.

A mass of psions shot from Tatsuya's palm, and ripped the psions away from the body of the Parasite. No, a closer image would not be 'ripped' but rather 'scattered'.

Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Mikihiko had examined the results of previous engagements, and deduced that the Parasites were a core of Pushion information bodies with a thin layer outside; schematically speaking analogous to a fibrous layer of Psion information bodies coating a Pushion

center; this led to the hypothesis that they consumed Psions whenever they used magic.

Destroying the Pushion body itself was difficult for Tatsuya. That had been proven twice now.

He had discovered, however, that he could cripple them.

And while Mikihiko would have difficulties sealing a Parasite alone, when stripped of magical resistance and weakened it was a different story.

"Mikihiko!"

Tatsuya called out into the hands-free headset. It wasn't necessary. Thanks to Honoka's optical magic and Mizuki's 'eyes', Mikihiko was already fully aware of the events transpiring in the field.

Mikihiko 'seeing' what was happening, and calling down a bolt of lightning from the heavens, was almost simultaneous with Tatsuya's call. The lightning struck the dead body of the host, and seared the skin black. Remaining carved on the skin were a series of characters and regular geometrical patterns.

"Nice shot!"

Erika shouted out with delight. In Tatsuya's sight, no information was leaking from the host body.

However, he didn't share Erika's joy just yet.

He fired more shots at the Parasite he had disabled.

The body of the host, left to its biological responses, was flailing around wildly.

Another flash of sealing retribution struck down. The body, hit by Tatsuya's Psion bullets, stopped moving. That made two Parasites sealed.

At the edge of his vision, different thunder roared. Rather than Ancient lightning, it was a blitz of modern magic.

He saw a body charred by Lina's magic. It was probably already just an empty shell.

"One escaped. Mizuki, do you have it?"

"I'm sorry, keeping track of everything from here is....."

When he reflexively inquired into the headset, the answering tone was apologetic. Thinking about it, this was natural; as Mizuki's vision couldn't extend to that which she couldn't physically see, she couldn't enlarge and view distant objects.

"I see. Sorry, I asked something unreasonable. Don't mind it."

Following up to Mizuki, Tatsuya turned to Lina and Erika with a bitter look.

"Angie Sirius."

That she was upset behind her mask was not an illusion of Tatsuya's.

"What."

But this time, she seemed willing to talk. Her voice had changed as well, was this another effect of 'Parade'?

"Try not to kill them until they're sealed. The cleanup will be troublesome."

She was momentarily at a loss for words. She intuitively understood that Tatsuya hadn't said 'troublesome' simply to look bad; he truly did simply view a person's life and death as a 'hassle'. —Not that it changed Lina's answer.

"It's not my problem. I am merely here for the deserters."

While she had consciously changed her tone, it was still possible to tell from her intonation, Tatsuya thought.

Of course, what he said was completely different.

"The duty of Sirius is it.....well, that's why we want to seal the bodies. One's escaped."

"That is not included in my mission."

Stubborn as ever. And negotiating with someone unwilling to listen had never been Tatsuya's strong point. His stance had always been 'if you don't want to listen then fine do what you like, and so will I'. However, he had to get her to listen in this case. Tatsuya persevered as he suppressed the urge to heave a sigh.

"Mission you say, but the one you killed just now seems like an Asian born and bred. Was he really a deserter?"

Tatsuya wasn't completely certain that wasn't the case. It was a bluff really. But Lina was clearly upset. His guess appeared to have hit the mark.

".....Even if not a deserter, he was guilty of aiding them."

Yet even now, her stubbornness refused to relent.

"I'll say it again, the Parasites are no concern of mine. All I'm here for is to fulfill my role as Sirius."

Saying so, Lina disappeared into the forest.

Holding back an urge to shrug, Tatsuya turned to Erika.

"So she came out, that Sirius."

Erika came leaping over. Knowing that she smiled without holding a grudge over the events of three days ago, Tatsuya could only smile wryly in turn.

After her grin of triumph passed, the smile vanished,

"That was.....Lina wasn't it? Although she looked completely different."

And Erika asked with a straight face.

"If she looked completely different, why would you think so?"

"Her actions, I guess. The way she moved and carried herself, it's all so familiar."

"Good point....."

Tatsuya had to acknowledge Erika's powers of observation. The illusory magic 'Parade' which changed everything from face to build had been seen through by something so trivial.

Still, he couldn't be stuck in admiration forever.

"I think you understand already, but keep it a secret. That being said, I'd like to apply what I said to Lina to you as well."

"Don't kill em?"

"Yes. You heard the explanation. As long as the host doesn't die, the Parasites cannot escape from within them. We put up a barrier to prevent escape, but neutralising without killing is still the best way to make sure."

Tatsuya's request was reasonable. Erika understood that.

"I'm sorry. It's unfair on you Tatsuya-kun, but I can't do that."

However, Erika — Erika shook her head.

"One who is prepared to kill by the sword, must also be prepared to be killed. Thinking about that moment.....I just can't purposely prolong their pain without killing them."

The reason was completely different from Lina however. It was personal, and her true feelings.

"It'd be different if they could be saved without killing them, but sealing them is the same as killing them isn't it? So even if they're no longer human, I want to take them down without drawing out their suffering."

There was no nervousness in Erika's expression, or her eyes. Her determination however was resolute.

"Guess it can't be helped."

Killing was an absolute to Tatsuya. Whether one was killed after being inflicted with suffering or not, the end result of being killed did not change; this was Tatsuya's reasoning.

He didn't try and sway Erika however. Values were an individual matter.

Some of which did not bear another's meddling.

"Well, I'll just have to work extra hard."

That exterminating the Parasites would require such contradictory commitment didn't cross Tatsuya's mind.

◊ ◊ ◊

Leo, chasing after Tatsuya, saw the flashes of thunder and psion light from the battle and suddenly froze. With almost no delay, Miyuki immediately

stopped as well. Pixie, in the body of a machine, took a few steps to come to a halt.

"Saijou-kun, be careful."

"That's my line."

Leo spoke in a joking tone, but his eyes were already sweeping left and right.

"We're surrounded.....or something. It seems like it if nothing else. I'm empty handed for now, but what should we do Miyuki-san?"

He had no far-sight or infrared perceptions. He had done no particular training either, but observing his surroundings he could vaguely make out the signs of others' maneuvers .

"Let's intercept."

Miyuki's reply was short and straightforward.

"......That's pretty aggressive."

Leo's reaction wasn't quite as enthusiastic.

"Is that so? But there's nothing to be afraid of you know? Even if things get out of hand, Onii-sama will come over and help immediately."

"Ah~, of course, of course."

Her reasoning was very cute however.

His eyes narrowed as he unintentionally muttered.

"Though, I don't want to bother Onii-sama either....."

As Miyuki debated back and forth to herself, she called out to Pixie.

"Pixie, stay behind me."

"Yes."

Turning towards the thicket on the left, Miyuki gave instructions. Ordered by Tatsuya to obey Miyuki, Pixie complied with minimal verbosity and moved into position.

The mobile terminal CAD in Miyuki's left hand was already on standby. As Leo wondered just when she had reached for it, he found himself looking at her with admiring eyes once again.

To his credit, his gaze didn't remain fixed indefinitely.

He was an 'unconcerned' type, but even if not Miyuki herself would have ignored it without noticing the eyes of any save Tatsuya's.

Her awareness was already focused on the enemy.

Miyuki's fingers moved smoothly. The thumb of her left hand gripping the CAD danced across the force feedback panel.

There was no warning.

The air of the forest gleamed. Glittering shards of ice formed on trunks and branches and fell to the ground. It was a phenomenon known as thin ice, or diamond dust. February, inland, in a forest at night; needless to say it would normally be impossible given the conditions.

There were none who mistook it for a natural occurrence however.

It was a magic which formed an area of diamond dust in a 100 meter radius instantaneously. This was neither an offensive nor defensive magic however. Unsure of the intent of the other party, Miyuki was merely declaring her territory.

By merely forming a thin layer of interference, the weather had changed. In the Yokohama incident of October, Mari had evaluated Miyuki's magic as 'worthy of Tactical level'.

Strictly speaking, that was incorrect. Miyuki's magic wasn't 'worthy of' tactical. It was tactical.

Miyuki's magic abilities, rather than enhancing an effect, were more specialised towards suppressing an area.

—Power sufficient to, even unintentionally, dye the world white as far as the eye could see—

That was Miyuki's magic.

In this situation, Leo was truly impatient.

To him, a fight was the means by which 'talks' were resolved.

Like in Yokohama, in a situation where it was clear the opponent had no interest in words, strength would immediately become the 'mediator'.

If it was the enemy who had underestimated them and come over, he would not be stingy in 'correcting' them with his fists.

If it was an acquaintance in trouble, he would 'lend a hand' in a rough violent manner.

It may be called 'uncivilised', but fighting had always been a staple of negotiating.

In the face of Miyuki's power, however, nevermind their claim; the enemy's very existence would be blown away.

Rather than a cat toying with a mouse, it would be more like an elephant crushing ants.

They would be far too pitiful to be considered opponents.

That was against Leo's style.

"Miyuki-san, I'll take these chumps on. Just back me up until Tatsuya arrives!"

In this darkened frozen world, a focused fighting spirit blazed forth.

There was no hostility, only willpower. No negative feelings, simply purpose.

The other party were professional fighters incomparable with typical city thugs, yet nonetheless he threw down the gauntlet before Miyuki. His mind was probably already made up.

"Oh? Then, I'll leave things to you."

At Leo's words, Miyuki lightly stepped back.

The frigid air permeating the forest however lingered.

Like I'll lose to these guys, Leo psyched up.

From the shadow of the trees and thickets, men in field uniforms wielding large knives materialised one after another.

After around ten, the newcomers ceased.

No more flashes had been seen in the direction they had been heading towards, and the din of battle was no longer audible. It seemed things had settled one way or another.

"Panzer."

Muttering 'hurry up, Tatsuya' in his mind, Leo spoke the voice command to deploy his activation sequence.

Ironically, that became the signal.

Wordlessly, soundlessly, one of the encircling soldiers sprang forth.

Fast! Leo barely had time to think before the knife thrust.

He repelled it with his left arm.

Both Leo and the soldier were startled.

Yet neither of them lost a beat.

The soldier's free left hand shot towards Leo's face.

Although he had a bit of time Leo followed his instincts and immediately threw himself to the right.

A shockwave hammered the side of his face.

Eardrums — stable. Vestibular system[6] — minor damage.

While checking the damage he received, Leo rolled over and sprang up. He really would have liked to distance himself further, but his opponent was not so permitting.

The moment he was on his feet, the knife was already flashing in. If he had still been on the ground, the knife would have approached from above and it would have been checkmate.

The blade was aimed at his shoulder — it seemed the opponent was not intent on killing a fellow Japanese high school student — and Leo intercepted it with his arm.

The 'penetration' magic on the knife clashed with the 'fortification' magic on the faux leather sleeve.

The knife having failed to strike Leo's skin, he proceeded to slam a fist into the soldier's chin. It was a superb left hook.

The power of the strike, strengthened by genetic manipulation and then even further by relentless training was enough to knock out the seasoned soldier in a single blow. The movement of the other nine soldiers, however, was not affected.

Without a moment's pause, more knives came flashing in from both sides. Just one had been barely manageable, and now there were two of them. Furthermore, the lengths of the blades were different.

Even a master swordsman would have found it difficult to deal with that combination of blows. And despite his superhuman reflexes and however fast his reactions were, Leo was no master swordsman. In order to learn to wield Usuba Kagerou, in the short period of time Leo spent in the Chiba dojo, he had acquired the sword ability of a black belt. But there were limits. The rich soil of his capabilities could only do so much against the storm.

Trusting in his magic, Leo focused on the enemy to his left.

He shut out the sight of the knife approaching from the right.

Sliding under the slim sword aimed at his clavicle, he sprang up and swung his left arm around.

The impact of Leo's punch on the opponent's nose was almost simultaneous with the sound of blade ringing on blade.

"—Thanks for the assist."

Leo's flicker punch had merely grazed the enemy's face, and was far from decisive.

The attacking two soldiers jumped back out of reach.

One of them was empty handed.

The knife he had held was stamped firmly under Leo's foot.

"You seemed like you were in trouble."

What had knocked it out of his hand was Erika's sword.

"Well, even if I hadn't jumped in it seems Miyuki was ready to cover you."

Looking back, Leo saw Miyuki merely return a faint smile. If Erika hadn't arrived in time, it was likely the enemies' arms would have been frozen solid.

Leo felt an involuntary shudder.

"Where's Tatsuya?"

Trying to suppress the feeling, he changed the subject.

"He's having fun with the guys who were circling around back."

Erika purposely replied in a loud voice.

As per her intention, the soldiers seemed rather agitated.

"Miyuki, Tatsuya-kun said for you to link up with him."

"What about Pixie?"

Still on the sidelines, Miyuki replied to Erika's message in a slightly flustered voice.

—Although this was not the time to be laughing, Erika couldn't help but feel a laugh coming up her throat.

"Pixie will assist us. Pixie, instructions should have come from Tatsuya-kun already right?"

"As per Master's orders, authorisation for use of psychic powers, confirmed"

"And there it is. Miyuki, just leave this place・to・us."

Despite the situation, Erika was perfectly content to make a show.

"Then, please take care."

Miyuki's reply was brief, then she left without looking back.

"Ahh~h……do you even know where he is? Well, that would be rather insensitive."

"You two over there."

Leo's face too was different from before, a fearless expression welling up.

Although he himself was desperately trying to suppress it.

"Now then……it's been left to us, so shall we clean up?"

Aware of the change in Leo, and deliberately not pointing it out, Erika gripped Mizuchimaru. At that moment.

"No, that's enough. Erika, sheathe your sword."

A new player appeared on the stage.

Erika sharply drew a breath.

The tall shadow who came out from the darkness of the artificial forest was,

"Jikei-ue[7]……"

Erika's second eldest brother, Chiba Naotsugu.

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The reason Tatsuya called Miyuki to his side was not purely because he was worried about her. Of course such an element always existed, but consciously at least the reason was different. He had perceived a situation occurring beyond Leo and Erika's abilities to deal with. In order to handle it, Miyuki's powers would be necessary.

And the situation he had predicted had occurred.

Right behind him, Miyuki gasped. –Devastation was spread out before her.

In front of Tatsuya, in twos and threes, lay the fallen bodies of the defence forces. Although they didn't know, these were the combatants sent by the Kudou.

This was not Tatsuya's handiwork.

Rather it was the Parasites, now engaged in battle with Lina.

"Lina, get back!"

"Useless talk!"

Tatsuya was not merely watching either. He was in the midst of the engagement as well.

Lina was attacking a group of Parasites head on. Their number was six. Factoring in the number of opponents cleared up already, it was more than the amount calculated by Pixie.

If they had been six ordinary opponents, the fight would have been over. The name of Sirius wasn't just for show, and as the one whose main mission was the hunter of rogue magicians 'Siriuss specialty could be said to be magic combat. Normally, these numbers could never trouble 'Sirius' to this degree.

Yet Lina was struggling. If Tatsuya had not been constantly decomposing the magic raining down upon her, she might have been done already.

Lina's greatest weapon was her activation speed.

Faced with that overwhelming speed, most opponents would be defeated without being able to lift a finger. That was Lina's specialised style. Even her habit of arming herself with handguns was to match this.

The Parasites however could work magic literally just by thinking it.

Magic born of images.

Without the need for activation sequences or other such media, it was like a 'psychic power'.

While this was a strength to them, it was also their weakness. The variation in what they could exercise was limited. It seemed there was also a limit to the images the monsters could visualise, although for reasons different from humans.

One of the merits of modern magic was increased variation. In return for sacrificing speed, an increase in stability and diversity was achieved. Countless experiments and practical situations had proved this was a beneficial trade off. That was why development had progressed so far in this direction.

However while it was a boon to those in small groups or alone by allowing a limited number to respond to a range of situations and focus their efforts, in cases like 'burn the enemy in sight' speed was definitely a more important factor.

CADs were tools developed to satisfy both diversity and speed. Even amongst CADs, however, the existence of the specialised type, which traded variation for speed, showed just how major a factor it was.

Both the three Parasites earlier, and the six now.

The advantage couldn't be said to be something simple like double.

According to Lanchester's square law, the war potential of an attacking group in terms of firepower was equivalent to the number of soldiers (or weapons, or combat units) squared. Relating this to combat magic, per unit time the number of magic attacks three could output against one was 9:1, or a difference of eight; in this case the potential magic difference between six and two was 36:4, or a difference of 32.

Such a difference could only mean trouble.

The reason Tatsuya and Lina could face off against that numerical advantage was because they could overturn the difference in potential magic difference per unit time. As it stood, however, they could not take the initiative, and both Tatsuya and Lina were forced to focus on defence. Tatsuya in particular had his hands full just decomposing all the magic coming at them.

He had summoned Miyuki because he had predicted this situation beforehand.

"Miyuki!"

"Yes, Onii-sama!"

Those were all the words the two needed.

Simply by calling her name, Miyuki knew what her brother required of her.

From Miyuki's body, or more precisely from the coordinates where Miyuki's body was present a torrent of heavy interference power was released.

Zone Interference.

With no definite event modification goal, it was anti-magic solely for the sake of disabling other magic.

A magic which prevents others from modifying events. A technique to shut down all magic except your own.

Lanchester's square law was established for cases where attacks were scattered and interspersed. It couldn't be applied to that overwhelming pressure.

Miyuki's Zone Interference made the area a magic null zone.

In the face of that both Tatsuya and Lina switched to narrow, high density magics.

Their interference strength was only enough to counteract Miyuki's.

Mounting a direct attack against Miyuki within her zone would have been difficult even for these two, but otherwise despite significant reductions in number and speed they were still able to activate magic.

The interference power of the Parasites however couldn't compare to those two, or rather the three of Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Lina.

Tatsuya and Lina continued to activate magic in succession.

Lina's magic targeted six. Tatsuya's magic targeted 12. Half of Tatsuya's shots were meant to break down the magic of Lina, who was aiming to kill the Parasites' hosts, but his Gram Dispersion was only in time to dissolve half of Lina's magic sequences.

As a result.

Three of the Parasites were hit by Lina's magic and slain,

While three of the Parasites were pierced by Tatsuya's magic and self-destructed.

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Magicians of the blade.

This was the second name given to those of the Chiba house, for the close combat techniques combining swordplay and magic.

Using magic in close combat was not something unique to the Chiba.

The Martial Magic Arts developed by Stars prior to their separation from the Marine Corps was probably earlier. As if to counter the USNA, the New Soviet Union developed hand to hand magic techniques blanketed under the name Commando Sambo (although this had by now fallen into disuse).

During the tumultuous formation of the Indo-Persian Union, in the northern regions centered around Delhi, traditional Jamadhar daggers were given modern redesigns and used as weapons.

But as far as it was known, close combat techniques used with magic developed outside of Japan had all been created around assisting 'ranged magic' and firearms. The main idea was, while advancing, to output attacks comparable to firearms while exerting defence against opposing firearms.

On the other hand the 'sword arts' practiced by the Chiba lay in using techniques to augment the main system of close combat. By casting on oneself to close the distance from ranged weapons to hand to hand, then attacking with swords which were superior at that distance to both knives and bare hands, the opponent would be quickly subdued. These skills, excelling in both surprise and stealth, were a great advantage in guerrilla warfare and antiterrorist operations for both the Japanese military and police.

The swords techniques themselves had not been devised by the Chiba. At the same time as military applications for magic were being studied in Japan, various magicians had been experimenting with the idea of combining swords and sorcery. The Chiba had simply structured it to be easy to learn.

By organising it to be simple to pass on, however, 'techniques' became 'arts'. This was groundbreaking for its transmission. The previous head of the Chiba was praised as the 'modern (Kamiizumi) Nobutsuna[8]', and for their achievement the Chiba house became respectfully known as the 'magicians of the blade'.

In the background, it was said that up to 70-80% of the magicians in the army and riot police were learning the Chiba blade arts.

Amongst those were the guerrilla infantry platoon of the defense forces First division, the 'Sword Corps'. They belonged to the Kudou faction, but at the same time they were a close combat unit using short ranged magic and swords, and compared to other infantry units had received training from the Chiba for a longer period of time.

To them, the Chiba were like their master. Although they knew nothing about Erika, who was not publicly acknowledged, they naturally knew about Naotsugu who was famous as the 'Chiba Kirin'. Not just knew; the

commander of the squad had been personally introduced to the sword through Naotsugu.

And so,

"Assistant instructor……"

The reason they had frozen the moment Naotsugu arrived onto the scene was for that reason.

In terms of military rank, the squad commander as a regular officer outranked the student Naotsugu.

Right now, however, the hierarchy was martial.

Naotsugu stepped through their unmoving ranks, and stood to face Erika.

Erika appeared daunted.

However, she immediately rallied and looked back strongly.

Even if it was bravado, for both Erika and Naotsugu, this was a milestone.

Erika had directed her sword at Naotsugu.

This didn't mean they were literally pointing blades at each other.

Both of their swords were still aimed at the ground.

Yet everyone could sense that the two were at knifepoint.

Naotsugu was aware that this sister of his, born of a different mother, had always been relying on him.

He had considered this understandable.

Children were not so strong that they could live without depending on anyone — he had always thought so. To him, there was no one who was forceful enough to 'become an adult without needing anyone else'.

Normally, these would be the parents. Parents are the ones a child unconditionally relies on.

But for Erika, this was not the case. Her mother was weak, and her father had not been content to play that role from the start.

In truth, Naotsugu also hated his father. The reason he was so absorbed in what Erika called 'frivolous' pursuits was partially due to the spite he felt towards their father. Why had this man's brothers and sisters, looking at he who abandoned his obligations as a parent, not found anything strange with it. Rather, as the head of one of the Hundred Families, it had been seen as something natural.

It may have been then that he felt sympathy for this half-sister of his. In the family he alone had been gentle with her, spoiled her, encouraged her, and raised her to be able to stand on her own two feet.

It seemed the time for his sister to finally become an adult had come, Naotsugu thought.

He experimentally released a blast of sword pressure. While it was a spiritual technique, when used by a highly skilled practitioner it could actually manifest cut skin and blood flow along with the illusion of being cut.

Erika deflected Naotsugu's sword pressure with pressure of her own. By deflecting, rather than dodging, she was declaring she could face him straight on.

Involuntarily, a smile drifted onto Naotsugu's expression.

He raised his right hand.

When it appeared he was lifting his weapon, his sword was already swinging towards Erika.

It wasn't that he had acted faster than the eye could see.

By minimising preceding actions and blurring the line between preliminary act and the true act, he achieved this 'earliness'. This was a phantom blade technique, which took advantage of the blind spot in the opponent's recognition. A skill realized by merely moving his limbs, the sword of the genius.

Erika's blade intercepted that slash of Naotsugu's.

He had intended to stop his blade in the beginning, but now he held the course. Countering Naotsugu's 'earliness', by her outstanding senses and reaction rate, was Erika's 'speed'.

A clear smile now broke out onto Naotsugu's face.

The tension coloring Erika's eyes darkened.

She gripped her sword two handed against the sword Naotsugu had swung with one, and pushed back hard.

Abruptly, the pressure disappeared.

Without a moment's delay, Erika caught herself.

Not bothering to correct their posture, the siblings faced each other again.

Then Naotsugu turned around and faced away.

Wary of a surprise, Erika slipped a slight 'opening' into her stance.

Yet no blow came to take advantage of that opportunity.

"Jikei-ue……?"

Naotsugu did not respond to his sister, and instead raised his sword towards the sword corps.

Dismay filled their faces.

They took positions, but their reactions were notably duller than Erika's.

—He held no fondness for them.

The smile on Naotsugu's face disappeared.

"National Defence Academy special warfare technology research division, Reserve second lieutenant Chiba Naotsugu."

Keeping his sword raised, Naotsugu declared his name, rank and affiliation. (By the way, to achieve the rank of second lieutenant while still in school, and a sophomore at that, regardless of being in reserve, was exceptional even for a magician and could only come through having true achievements.)

"I am currently carrying out my mission of escorting civilians who have become the target of terrorists. Please state your name, rank and affiliation!"

At Naotsugu's apparent about-face, Erika exchanged glances with Leo.

"If you have been mobilised for the purpose of harming civilians, that will be construed as an act of rebellion against democracy. I will oppose you with all my might."

Listing the Ten Master Houses and the Hundred Families under democracy was really stretching it. They pursued the interests of magicians more than that of the general public after all.

Those were Erika's thoughts upon hearing Naotsugu's speech, and Naotsugu himself felt so too.

There was no hesitation in the aura he now emitted however.

With the addition of Naotsugu's blade, the situation had shifted into a stalemate.

The confrontation between Naotsugu and the Sword Corps was interrupted by an explosion of Psions a short distance away.

"Erika, Leo, take care!"

"That's the Parasite's true body!"

Slightly blurred from the speed of speech, an impatient voice flew from the communication device.

They were Mikihiko's and Mizuki's voices.

As a warning, it was incomplete.

"Jikei-ue! It seems a Parasite's true body is heading towards here!"

Erika however deduced what the two were trying to say.

The ones who became wariest as a result of Erika's words were probably the Sword Corps.

All things considered, the probability Naotsugu had not received a full briefing on the Parasites was high.

Erika was both impatient and hesitant as to whether she should try to explain their threat or not.

Spreading her awareness in all directions right down to the level of her feet, Erika turned to face Naotsugu.

At that moment, whether because she had perceived accurately or by chance.

The ground behind Erika exploded. A figure leaped up from amongst the raining sand and debris.

"Earth release!?"

It was Leo who cried aloud. Of the techniques commonly known as the 'art of five releases', one of the first-class schools of Ancient magic, Ninjutsu, was particularly adept at using the five elements of 'wood', 'fire', 'earth', 'metal' and 'water' as a medium for reconnaissance, flight and ambushes. That variation was a duality of ninjutsu and Japan itself, but after ninjutsu and its 'art of five releases' became famous, internationally all magic using these five elements came to be blanketed under the terms 'wood release', 'fire release', 'earth release', 'metal release' and 'water release'.

In short, just because this attack came from underground did not automatically make it actual ninjutsu. It was just as likely this was Ancient magic from the continent. There was no time to ponder that now however.

The target of the emerging man was not Erika but the one opposite her, Pixie.

A blade resembling a thick hatchet swung down upon Pixie from the underground assailant.

"Shield!"

Leo jumped in front of her. The hatchet the man had swung took Leo in the left arm, and was caught in the protector of his CAD.

"Leo, that's a Parasite!"

Hearing Mikihiko's warning, Leo whipped his arm around and flung both the hatchet and Parasite away.

After his bitter experience, he made sure not to touch the thing's body directly. But even Leo's strength was not enough to disarm it. The Parasite brandished the hatchet again.

The monster's feet however never kicked off the ground.

A sword was pierced through its chest.

Erika, having impaled the Parasite with Mizuchimaru, wore a faint smile as if saying 'whoops'. Perhaps she remembered Tatsuya's entreaty not to kill. She had opposed his words at the time, but it still was what it was.

The attack had not only come from the ground. The moment Naotsugu's attention had been diverted by the events occuring behind Erika's back, a soldier had sprung from behind the sword corps with blade in hand.

That he appeared like a soldier was an illusion. Dressed in a navy blue costume indistinguishable in the darkness, the man had deprived a sword corps soldier of his weapon and rushed towards Pixie. The leap was assisted by weight systematic magic. The man's body didn't make a parabola with the ground, and closed in on Pixie faster than gravitational acceleration.

The blade held overhead never fell. In the middle of his spring, the man was knocked aside by a kick from Naotsugu.

The flying jump kick was so brilliant it was hard to remember that Naotsugu was actually a swordsman. The beautiful form wouldn't have been out of place in a karate dojo poster. Erika had always accused Naotsugu of wasting time with 'frivolous magic', but evidently he had been involved in various other aspects such as martial arts as well.

A murmur arose from the sword corps. The soldier whose blade had been taken was collapsed. He had likely received an attack from this man. The feedback from the kick had been considerable, but Naotsugu carefully walked towards the man now lying on the ground. He had been hidden carefully enough that even Naotsugu had not noticed him before the attack. There was no such thing as too much precaution.

Such attentiveness was quickly rewarded.

When Naotsugu reached a distance of three steps away, the man's body suddenly burst. Naotsugu jumped back, but he was inevitably caught up in the spraying gore.

At this unforeseen development, Naotsugu was at a loss. Behind him, Erika and Leo also frowned. The sword corps were stunned. Nobody in that place noticed the Psion wrapped Pushion mass which issued from both the impaled man and the ruptured body.

"Pixie, link up with me!"

Breaking the spell was Tatsuya's rough voice issuing through the communication devices.

"Of course."

Pixie turned to the direction of the Psion explosion, the direction that Miyuki had headed towards and where Tatsuya was likely right now, and began running.

"Honoka, please follow Pixie."

From the voice communicators set to group communication mode, Tatsuya's voice flowed again.

"Got it!"

Honoka's voice was terse.

"Erika and Leo, don't move from there. Tell the people there likewise."

"Eh.....right."

"O-Ok."

Erika and Leo replied in voices suggesting they had not yet fully recovered.

Overhead, the two Psion and Pushion lumps chased after Pixie like clouds blown by the wind.

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"Honoka, please follow Pixie."

"Got it!"

Receiving Tatsuya's instructions, Honoka wasted no time. —Immediately after acknowledging, however, she realized she didn't know exactly what it was she was meant to be doing.

It was quite a Honoka-ish moment, but her subsequent action was just like her as well. Being told to 'follow', she decided to monitor her status for now and trained her optical magic towards Pixie.

Although that was easier said than done.

She lucked out.

Despite there being various interpretations for those words, Honoka decided to open the Psion circuits which linked her to Pixie.

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There had been a total of 12 Parasites drawn to this world.

One currently inhabited the integrated auxiliary housework humanoid robot, the Humanoid Home Helper '3HP' Pixie.

Two had been sealed in today's battles.

Four had had their hosts killed by Lina, and one by Erika, releasing them.

Four more had self destructed, being likewise released.

A total of nine had lost their hosts, and that was the number of Parasites gathering here now. As their true bodies, the spirits were drawn to Pixie.

They were all Pushion bodies from the same dimension of information.

Originally, all 12 had been one 'consciousness'.

Having their true body exposed, they were now trying to return to one existence.

The nine Parasites had coalesced already.

Whilst sharing the consciousness of one, yet possessing nine wills, they were an amorphous Pushion mass.

That structure of one stem branching into nine, if one possessed 'eyes' capable of 'seeing' Pushions, one no doubt would have thought of one of the most famous spirits of this country, albeit with one head extra[9].

And it was attempting to capture one more.

Spreading their nine necks, they resembled a 'serpent' bent on devouring Pixie.

Pixie fortified her barrier of 'will', and endured the storm.

That will, what drove 'her' now, was something imparted to her by the human who could be called her 'mother'. Even now these feelings from her 'mother' flowed into her matrix of Pushions, mixing in.

The will that she was not one of 'those'.

The will that she was not her own.

The will that she existed for 'him'.

A single individual's will would not normally be able to oppose 'those'.

But Pixie's 'mother', Honoka, was not normal.

She was a descendant of the 'Elements'. The blood of the Element of 'Light' flowed through her veins.

The Elements were those magicians who had first practitioned magic in this country, before the development of the Numbers.

Before the organisation and classification of the four systems and eight types, a classification based on the traditional attributes of 'earth', 'water', 'fire', 'wind', 'light' and 'thunder' had been used. The Elements had developed in accordance with this concept.

Upon the establishment of the four system eight type classification, however, the developments of those magicians following the traditional attributes became regarded as inefficient, and the development of the Elements ceased.

This could be said to be one of the frequently questioned episodes of the secret history of magic development.

However, the Elements also innately inherited — or were given — gifts separate from magic.

During the dawn of magic research. When fears and superstitions of those against magic ran rampant.

The authorities who practiced Elements development, being labeled as 'sorcerers' and 'witches', took it upon themselves to show that they would not be a threat. They had scientists incorporate into them genes compelling absolute obedience to their leaders.

Is this characteristic inheritable?

That is a question which is still unanswerable even now, vexing both psychologists and geneticists alike.

Even identical twins will grow up to have very different personalities. In light of this fact, it could be concluded that 'personalities are not inheritable'.

On the other hand if one goes back long enough through parent and child, grandparents and grandchildren, great grandparents and great grandchildren and so on, undeniable similarities begin to show which cannot be explained away by simple 'environmental factors'.

With this challenge the authorities had given to them, the genetic engineers took whatever steps they could.

As a result — although it cannot be said whether it was for better or worse — the 'descendants of the Elements' have a high chance of expressing a certain trait.

That is, dependency.

It was very commonly observed that they would have one specific person, usually of the opposite sex, that they would greatly attach to and rely on.

The descendants of the Elements themselves believed that their destinies were written in their genes.

Perhaps, using that as an excuse was their way of accepting their reliance on another.

The 'dependency' that they felt was not the publicly perceived emotional 'weakness'.

Some scholars have claimed that there was a more appropriate word for that 'dependency'.

That is, 'loyalty'.

An unshakable faith, that 'I am theirs'.

That was more than strong enough to push back the coalescing synergetic will of the spirits.

◊ ◊ ◊

The point where Tatsuya had been fighting the Parasites, and the point where Erika had been confronting Naotsugu.

Pixie's battle against 'that', and withstanding 'thats attack, was right between the two.

Reaching that place, Tatsuya saw the shape of the nine-headed dragon rearing its heads as if to devour Pixie.

He could not comprehend the Pushion information structure. But he knew there was 'something' there. He could *see* it.

Nine Pushion information information bodies were joined together at the base. And branched into nine, that interface was attempting to capture Pixie. That was sufficient to resemble a nine-headed dragon in his mind.

"What is that!?"

Lina, who had for some reason followed Tatsuya, exclaimed in shock.

"You can see it?"

"It's not.....that I can see it, but I can sort of understand it. Some massive 'power' is pressing on that doll. Tatsuya, just what is that?"

"The result of you not listening to Onii-sama."

It was Miyuki who responded to Lina. That blunt, frigid voice silenced Lina for the time being.

"Even though Onii-sama had told you not to kill them, you just mindlessly slaughtered the Parasites' hosts and now the bodies are rampaging free. Lina, how do you intend to solve this misconduct?"

Figured she wouldn't stay quiet at that.

"What misconduct! I was simply fulfilling my duty!"

"Then please settle the cleanup yourself. Can you? Even if you are unlike Onii-sama, do you have no idea how to solve things nonviolently?"

Ever since the combat earlier, a dangerous air had been simmering between these two beauties.

This was just a continuation of that.

"I'll do it! Just watch!"

Casting caution to the winds, Lina took the challenge.

"Hey, Lina."

However one looked at it, she had to be stopped. It was far too reckless for someone who had no idea how to begin countering the thing to just jump in.

Thinking that, Tatsuya called out in a pacifying tone.

"Shut up! Tatsuya, you keep quiet!"

For what good it did.

"I absolutely must make this mission a success! If not, then just why am I even here!"

The tantrum Lina threw was directed not only against Tatsuya. Hearing her cry, he himself realized that.

'Here' was not simply this location. Rather right here, right now she stood not as 'Angelina Shields' but as 'Angie Sirius' — that was what she meant.

At some point Lina's hair had reverted to gold, and her eyes to blue. Her 'Parade', which had not faltered even under Miyuki's heavy Zone Interference, had been released.

She was giving her all as 'Angelina Shields' to fulfill her mission as 'Angie Sirius'. Trying to be a 'Sirius'.

Glimpsing the heavy burden on her, Tatsuya was hesitant to follow up.

In that moment, Lina launched a magic attack of her own.

A veritable barrage, shot after shot ravaged the air and encountered empty space.

That was only natural.

Lina's magic was meant to modify physical events. She was simply not equipped with magic to fight an information body.

'Thats awareness turned towards Lina.

In Tatsuya's vision, the nine heads were now arrayed against her.

No sooner than that, a storm of magic fell.

It was all Tatsuya could do to try and bring them down.

When they had fought the Parasite information body at First high, only one person had been possessed and there was only one spirit.

That had already been difficult.

Now there were nine.

He could not expect to weather the storm.

No, on the contrary, there was no way that he alone could have stemmed the onslaught from 'that'.

Behind him, Miyuki was maintaining a supportive interference area over the place where 'that' existed. But even though Miyuki could 'sense' the Pushion information bodies, she could not 'see' them. Because of that, the interference area had to be loose. If she increased the field to cover all possibilities, it would interfere with Tatsuya's own magic.

That barely tenable situation continued, yet it was far too risky for the allied forces to relent even a little.

He felt a squeeze on the back of his jacket. Miyuki was also uneasy.

Although they knew that having lost their hosts the Parasites were now 'consuming' magic and had to run out of power at some point, not knowing just how much longer they had to hold out sapped their willpower considerably.

At this rate, Miyuki might end up the same way as Lina.

Because of her recklessness, Lina was now locked down under a shell of Data Fortification.

Not being able to launch an effective attack from their end was too big a handicap.

Magic which interfered with physical events was useless.

Physical attacks were completely out of the question.

If possible, mental magic might—

(—There's no choice.)

Clenching his teeth, Tatsuya decided to throw the dice.

"Mikihiko, can you see the situation?"

"Yes. I'm assembling a seal as fast as I can, so please hold out a bit longer."

The voice which answered from the communication unit was even more hurried than Tatsuya's.

"What is the likelihood that your seal could suppress this?"

The reply came after a pause.

"......Honestly speaking, not even fifty percent."

His confession was anguished.

Hearing Mikihiko's answer, Tatsuya did not think any less of him. In a direct confrontation, Tatsuya knew that he was not someone who would make rash promises.

"Mikihiko, just temporarily is fine. Could you suppress it for 10 seconds?"

At Tatsuya requesting for the first time, not just Mikihiko but everyone listening in on the communication gasped.

With no backup or proof, it was just a simple plea. In a (bad) sense, it was blind faith.

Yet it was not something he would do if he did not trust them.

"......Got it."

At least, that was what Mikihiko felt.

"For 10 seconds, I'll keep it down no matter what. I'll signal, so Tatsuya please do your own thing."

He had a plan, and he needed 10 seconds for it.

In order to secure that time, his power would be necessary.

Mikihiko was inspired by the trust Tatsuya was placing in him.

"Tatsuya-san, I'll also help!"

Honoka's firm voice followed Mikihiko's.

It was not in rivalry. There was one simple intent, that she wanted to be his strength.

"Alright. Mikihiko, on you."

"OK.....3, 2, 1, now!"

As he shouted, Mihiko unleashed his Anti-demon· Garuda flame.

The 'flame' expanded around 'that' — the nine-headed dragon the Parasites had combined into, and wrapped around the information bodies. It was like two serpents fighting each other.

Beneath them, Pixie was mentally pushing 'that' back. The Psion bonds holding Pixie were being replenished as fast as they were being consumed. Honoka saw that the Psions had almost completely captured Pixie's lower half.

Of course, Tatsuya wasn't just silently watching.

At the signal from Mikihiko, Tatsuya stretched out his arm not holding his CAD.

That arm,

Took hold of Miyuki's waist,

And pulled her in close.

"——!"

A silent scream. Or maybe a cry of delight.

In that instant both Miyuki's Zone Interference and Tatsuya's Gram Dispersion ceased, but Mikihiko and Honoka,

As promised kept 'that' at bay.

Held in Tatsuya's arms, with an expression of astonishment on her face, Miyuki looked up at him.

As his sister looked up, Tatsuya himself moved in closer.

As their foreheads touched, and their eyes melted together,

As their noses touched, and their lips came closer and closer,

"Miyuki, *look*!"

Tatsuya whispered firmly to Miyuki.

An invisible light flowed from him to her.

An invisible light flowed from her to him.

Between them, their auras pulsed.

"I see it, Onii-sama!"

It may have been that those were not words spoken from the mouth, but enounced from the heart.

Their communication lasted but an instant.

More than half of the 10 seconds still remained.

Tatsuya's left hand held Miyuki's head to his chest.

Both of Miyuki's arms were wrapped around him.

Tatsuya's right hand pointed at 'that'.

Within Miyuki's consciousness, the figure of 'that' was now clearly discernible.

Tatsuya's ability to 'see' information bodies.

Miyuki took Tatsuya's 'sight' to view 'that',

Released their seal, and unleashed her inherent magic.

Outer systematic・ Mental Interference magic, 'Cocytus'.

Magic to freeze the spirit.

Miyuki's magic struck the spirits themselves, stilling the Pushion information bodies--

—and bereft of a vessel, 'that' shattered into nothingness.

Chapter 17

Even though she had no way to view the spirits' true bodies, Lina sensed that 'that' had perished. The mass of 'information' had stopped — frozen, then crumbled. If being able to manipulate Psions within the dimension of information is the norm for magicians, there was no way a magician of the highest calibre like the 'Sirius' would not notice the collapse of such a high number of Psions.

"Lunar magic.....?"

And although she herself could not use Mental Interference magic, by using her magic sensitivity it was possible to guess from the result what sort of magic had been used.

Lunar magic is what English speaking magicians use to refer to a particular branch of mental interference magic, that which specifically targets and directly damages the spirit, and is named for one of the most famous Outer-systematic mental attack magics 'Lunar Strike'.

Lunar Strike, of the magics outside the Mental Interference system, unusually has its processes formulated out; since it is used by Stars of the 'First Class stars' rank then in the event that they became the enemy, the method of counteracting it was taught.

Naturally Lina had seen Lunar Strike countless times and thus although it was her first time seeing Cocytus and she did not fully understand its mechanisms, she was able to deduce that it had caused fatal damage to the spirit.

That, and that the caster had been Miyuki.

"Lunar magic of this power.....Miyuki, you.....no, just what are you two siblings?"

Still on the ground, Lina muttered.

If she had used this magic during their duel.....thoughts like that did not fully materialise in her mind. Shock still took up too much of her thought processes for now.

Actually, Miyuki was in a similar state.

Half lost in ecstasy, she was still firmly held in Tatsuya's embrace. In addition to that she had gone all out with her magic for the first time in a

while, as well as having seen the world through Tatsuya's eyes; she was likely still drunk with it all.

The two who were previously in a bad mood were now in a state of chaos; this was a chance. Tatsuya took the communication unit from his ear and switched it off.

"Lina, do not reveal what you saw just now."

Looking down at her, his voice was low and intimidating.

"W-What, suddenly....."

If she had been her normal self, such overbearing methods would have been counterproductive. But as Tatsuya expected, Lina was not her normal self.

She had been under enormous stress, and now with the disappearance of the target which had been such a tense load on her she had fallen into a state of collapse. It was a perfect condition for 'persuasion'.

"In return, we'll pledge to keep the identity of Angie Sirius secret. This applies not just to me and Miyuki, but everyone else involved in the incident today."

Lina gave no reply.

Blue eyes jittered between Tatsuya's. Gradually, he could see cognitive processes coming back.

Duty.

Suspicion.

Defensiveness,

Vindication.

Various thoughts flickered through her eyes, as within her (psychologically) rationalisation dawned. Tatsuya wasn't particularly skilled in psychoanalysis nor was he a telepath so he wasn't perfectly clear, but he intuitively knew that Lina was trying to convince herself somehow.

Her conflict didn't last very long.

"I have no choice in the matter do I?"

"It's not like that."

Tatsuya refuted her resigned words. He didn't elaborate on the consequences of her refusing either however.

Suspicion nurtures anxiety. Those unspoken words, or rather his unspoken action, were the final push.

"Fine.....if it keeps you quiet, it's not a bad deal for me. I'll remain silent about you two. .....No one will listen to what I have to say anyway."

That last phrase was mouthed quietly, so Tatsuya didn't hear. He didn't ask for clarification.

He was carrying Miyuki who was still limp; when she suddenly came to and started wriggling around he told her 'calm down' as they turned away from Lina.

Only faced away, not moving.

Immediately before Lina could call out in suspicion to Tatsuya,

"Lina."

Tatsuya called out to Lina instead.

"Is there something else?"

From her words alone it could be interpreted that Lina was still annoyed, but her voice was not as sullen as her words.

The air of being cornered a while ago had disappeared.

"If you wish to retire from the Stars....."

"Eh?"

"If you ever wish to quit being a soldier, I think I could help. No, it's not that I have any power, but there are people I know who could be of service."

"Tatsuya? Just, what are you saying?"

Lina didn't angrily burst out 'it's none of your business' or laughed out 'don't be a fool'.

"It's not that I particularly want to quit the Stars.....to stop being 'Sirius'."

She simply answered in wonder.

"I see."

Without looking back, Tatsuya curtly replied, then began to walk.

"Wait, Tatsuya! Why did you say such a thing!?"

Not turning around to Lina who called out in a loud voice,

"Sorry, I said something strange."

He merely spoke those words, and proceeded on.

The mechanical doll accompanying him likewise took no notice of Lina.

Only Miyuki, still held in Tatsuya's arms, looked back over his shoulder, giving Lina an anxious look.

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As Tatsuya's form disappeared into the dark night, Lina returned to herself with a sigh.

Realizing she had simply been motionlessly staring at Tatsuya's back, she rose from the ground in a hurry.

Why had her eyes been so resolutely following his back.....the moment such thoughts entered into her mind, Lina vigorously shook her head.

(It's just because he said something so weird. That's obviously it!)

Unconsciously, she had been fixed on his form all the while.

As soon as she was aware of her own actions, she also became aware of her flushed cheeks and the racing of her heart.

The fact was that she had merely been dragged into a 'misunderstanding' of her own making, but having in a sense fallen into his trap Lina was in no position to make a sober objective analysis. She was now being held captive in a psychological state similar to the suspension bridge effect.

In order to deflect the mortifying thought of 'love' from her consciousness, Lina desperately searched for anything else to think about. As a result, her mind fixated on his last question.

Tatsuya's puzzling proposal.

Wondering just why would he say such a thing, Lina tilted her head.

Was it because her face, her form, being attacked by monsters and having to dispose of her fellow countrymen, seemed to be in pain?

If that was the case then he was mistaken, Lina thought.

Being forced to turn her hand against her 'family' certainly caused her chest to ache.

Yet Lina believed her actions were merciful. That she was bringing them salvation.

She had long since learned that humans' dignity was something precious.

—It was difficult work, yet someone had to do it.

—She would not run from it.

—If a powerful magician fell to evil, then the only one who could oppose them was the strongest, Sirius, in other words only she herself.....

(.....Only she herself?)

Having never thought the matter over, Lina's thinking now stumbled.

Disposing of those fallen magicians before they gave birth to new victims. As the strongest, she was indeed the most suited for the task.

There had been no doubt in her mind — until now.

She now knew that was not an absolute.

Even if she didn't do it, those two would.

Even if she hadn't put herself through all the pain, the guilt of killing her brothers, those two would—

(I see.....that's why I was so lost, so impatient.)

The cobwebs which had clouded her mind for most of the month now melted away as if the sun had dawned.

Even if she herself doesn't do it, someone else would.

For Lina, it was like discovering something unimaginable.

She realized that her future she had thought to be decided, unchangeable, was something she could choose for herself. The straight road she had always thought lay before her suddenly branched — and with it came both anxiety and hope.

Having finally awakened from her illusion, Lina stayed wrapped in confusion for a while.

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Tatsuya's destination was the location of the two previously sealed Parasites. But someone had already gotten there first.

Two groups faced each other.

One was a black-clad group, led by an old man deeply wrinkled with years yet standing firm.

The other was also black-clad, led by a young lady in a black one piece dress.

Although facing each other, it didn't mean they were hostile. The group led by the girl, at any rate, showed no hostility towards the group led by the old man. That was probably because the girl, their leader, herself showed no hostility towards him.

Rather, the girl looked at the old man with respect. —At least, apparently.

"Your Excellency Kudou, it is an honor to see you."

The girl came forward and curtsied gracefully. Despite the elegance, however, there was no modesty. The light within her eyes was far too strong for that.

"My name is Kuroba Ayako. I am but a lowly member of the Yotsuba, and I serve at our Head, Maya's, convenience."

Raising her head, Ayako gave a playful smile.

A provocative yet withdrawn, enigmatic smile.

As expected, however, Kudou Retsu did not rise to the bait.

"A representative of the Yotsuba, is it. You seem solid, despite your youth. It appears you already know about me. Or should I introduce myself regardless?"

Close — although not in terms of friendliness — with Maya, Kudou was publicly of the same status, a fellow Head of one of the Ten Master Clans. The way he said 'Yotsuba', and the way he now looked upon Ayako who was of age with his grandchildren, was as an 'adversary'.

"No, that will not be necessary."

A light befitting his intentions dwelled within Kudou's eyes. Yet before that, Ayako's cutesy yet fearless attitude didn't break.

"By the way Your Excellency, we don't have much time, so there's something I'd like to discuss with you."

At her hasty, or rather determined, attitude, the Kudou elder showed no sign of discomfort. He didn't think things were as rushed as that, but since he also wished to conclude things quickly he went along with it.

"Go ahead."

"My thanks."

At the old man's liberality Ayako gave another theatrical bow, then looked straight into his eyes.

"I'm afraid that Your Excellency's objective, the beings called Parasites sealed here which you had intended to bring back, have also been tasked to be retrieved by us as per my Head's orders."

"Hou."

The light in Kudou's eyes increased in sharpness and intensity.

At that light a hint of trepidation crept into Ayako's face, yet she rebounded with a firm smile immediately.

"—By happy circumstance, however, there appear to be two sealed vessels. How about this, one for Your Excellency, and one for us?"

Maintaining her firm smile, Ayako looked into the old man's eyes and awaited his answer.

Kudou laughed unexpectedly.

Loudly, and in enjoyment.

"Oh my.....indeed. And you are yet but a junior high student."

Ayako had not told Kudou her age. His words implied that he had already pre-investigated her before she ever introduced herself.

There was no sign of disturbance in Ayako this time. It was her attitude that it was little wonder Kudou Retsu would have examined even a Yotsuba pawn such as herself.

Having herself known that Kudou Retsu would be taking to the field, that he would know of her was no surprise.

"Very well. Let us get along and go with one each."

"Thank you very much, Your Excellency."

Without changing her expression, Ayako patted her chest in relief.

She had no illusions as to her own magic strength. While she was not restricted in her magic like Tatsuya, she was not as universal as Miyuki either. She was a magician with defined strengths and weaknesses. And short range, direct combat magic was decidedly not one of her strengths.

She did not believe for a moment she could have hoped to take on one who was once lauded as the 'world's most skilled'.

Ayako gave silent thanks that by chance there had been two.

And—

(Tatsuya-san, I was able to perform my duty safely thanks to you.)

Even if Tatsuya hadn't agreed to cooperate, there wouldn't have been a time to request it anyway; Ayako slyly muttered in her mind.

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In Tatsuya's arms, Miyuki huddled.

However much she pleaded, Tatsuya would not put her down. Miyuki was not particularly petite for a lady, and was of a moderate weight. However much Tatsuya was trained there was no way the weight would not eventually be felt, but Tatsuya's arms cradling Miyuki wavered not in the

slightest. Rather, he was carrying her so carefully that Miyuki did not feel any swaying despite the unevenness of the ground.

From their everyday conduct and behaviour, Miyuki would be the natural suspect for initiating skinship. However, Miyuki didn't now even cling to Tatsuya's neck; she merely clasped her hands to her chest and withstood embarrassment.

The silence was painful.

Not bitter; yet, her chest ached.

It felt as if her breathing would stop, and her heart would burst — from the perspective of others it would no doubt be a surprising 'overreaction', but Miyuki herself was desperately searching for 'something to talk about' in her overheating mind.

"Onii-sama, about Lina?"

This was what came out.

Tatsuya had shown beyond ordinary care towards Lina. At least, far beyond that of a mere friend.

Because she understood, truthfully Miyuki had not wanted to bring the topic up with her brother.

But now nothing else came to mind.

"Yeah?"

"Lina.....did she seriously take Onii-sama's words to heart?"

Besides, Miyuki was also worried about her.

"I don't know. There's no way I could. I'm not her after all."

Somewhere under Tatsuya's tone was the feeling that it was unnecessary meddling.

Of course Miyuki knew her brother's words had been anything but. Even in Miyuki's eyes, the impulsive yet good-hearted Lina was ill-suited for the military. It may have not been her place, but looking at Lina she felt extremely conflicted.

"Lina has her own circumstances. Not being able to find her way is not something limited to her alone."

"Yet Onii-sama, you had reached out to her right.....? Why?"

"Why, what?"

Miyuki was well aware that they were stepping into uncharted territory. If they were to stop, it had to be now.

But Miyuki did not stop.

"Onii-sama.....why did you feel you had to help Lina? Is it because.....you have special feelings concerning her?"

Tatsuya's eyes widened upon hearing his sister's words, but it was only for a moment.

"You seem to be misunderstanding things in various ways....."

Tatsuya gave a wry smile. But his expression wasn't very serious. At least, he seemed to be trying to answer his sister's question in good faith.

"As you say, this is the first time I've interacted with someone like Lina. Until now, everyone in the military was much older than me, and they had all chosen their path."

One by one, he carefully went over the misconceptions.

"The feelings I have towards Lina are not the kind you think. Bluntly speaking, I simply think it'd be convenient in the future if Lina were to leave the Stars. If possible not just exit the army, but move here. Naturalising as a Japanese citizen would be best."

No lies could be felt in Tatsuya's words. This close together, they could sense each other. Miyuki was confident she would be able to detect any falsehood in her brother's speech.

"Of course, it's not like I feel no sympathy. In a sense, Lina and I are very similar. You could say that we're in the same category."

Tatsuya's eyes were far away.

"Both Lina and I were placed 'where we are now' by no will of our own. And although I can at least say that I 'selected' to come to First High, Lina probably didn't even have that trivial choice."

Although his eyes were fixed on Miyuki, his gaze was somewhere further.

"I took the choice I was not granted. I discarded the 'role' I had been assigned, and leaped from the stage I was given. If Lina had hoped for something similar, as someone who was in the same place as her I thought I would like to lend her my strength....."

As Tatsuya hesitated, his eyes shifted their focus back to Miyuki and he smiled uncomfortably.

"In any case, it seems it was rather, unnecessary?"

There was a reason for the turbulence in Tatsuya's tone.

Up to now Miyuki had been huddled in Tatsuya's arms, yet now she embraced him tightly

Without thinking, Tatsuya released his hold on his sister.

That being said he didn't suddenly drop her but gently let her down, probably something subconsciously ingrained into his body.

Even as she touched the ground, Miyuki's arms never left Tatsuya's neck.

"It wasn't unnecessary..... Onii-sama's care will definitely someday, someday soon, reach Lina."

Tatsuya felt his sister's words flow into him, seeping into his chest.

"I mean, after this incident, Lina must definitely be *doubting who she is now*. She's a bit simple, but Lina is a smart girl. Having been this deeply involved with Onii-sama, there's no way no questions would enter her mind."

"'Simple' is rather cruel."

Miyuki looked up, and moved her arms to Tatsuya's shoulders.

The siblings laughed together, then peacefully walked side by side.

Despite being a machine, or due to being a machine, having read the mood(?) Pixie had turned into a literal doll, and followed in silence.

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Even the heartwarming air between the siblings couldn't help but change upon seeing this.

The place where they had first sealed the Parasites was empty. The two sealed Parasites had been taken away by someone.

"I'm sorry, Tatsuya-san.....I didn't intend to look away."

".....Tatsuya-san, I'm so sorry!"

"Tatsuya, please don't blame Shibata-san and Mitsui-san. I can guarantee that they didn't slack off. I didn't notice at all that the sealed 'vessels' had been taken away. Even though it was my seal....."

"You guys, don't blame yourselves. I don't mind at all."

Hearing that completely discouraged voice, that self-hating voice and that regretful voice issuing from the communication device, Tatsuya strove to reply with a bright tone.

"Tatsuya-san....."

They possibly misunderstood it as him trying to cheer them up. Tatsuya's attitude had not merely been out of consideration towards them; he truly wasn't concerned.

.....He was amazed however.

"We got blindsided, but all it means is that they one-upped us this one time. We hadn't really considered what to do with them after the capture anyway, so there's no point being caught up in it forever."

As Tatsuya said, they hadn't made any plans about what to do 'after the capture'. They had only vaguely considered 'maybe we'll ship them off to Mikihiko's place', as they themselves had no use for the sealed Parasites whatsoever.

Meaning, the ones who had carried them off at least had something to do with them. If it were them, all they might end up doing was accidentally release the Parasites.

(But, well.....were they aiming for this?)

"Onii-sama?"

It seemed she was misunderstanding his silence. At Miyuki's anxious inquiry, Tatsuya shook his hand in reassurance.

From his state, Miyuki knew Tatsuya was making a guess as to who the culprits were. If he traced back, he could probably track them down, she thought.

—Certainly, Tatsuya had used his 'vision'. He knew approximately what had happened here.

However, before that, one of the 'culprits' had left a message here for Tatsuya.

The reason he was so listless was primarily because of that.

A gust of wind blew, and stirred up the dead leaves not stuck to the soil.

Mixed amongst them were black feathers[10], probably from a crow, that were captured by Tatsuya's own two eyes.

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When Tatsuya rejoined the duo of Erika and Leo, both Naotsugu and the Sword Corps had already withdrawn.

They patted each other's backs, didn't pry deeply into what had happened, and went back.

Pixie was left in the school garage.

In order to enter the school after jumping the fence they had to return to the main gate, but neither Leo nor Erika said 'it's a bother, I'm going home'.

After joining with Mikihiko and the others, the seven of them left school as a group.

Such a large group leaving school at this time received no little suspicion from the gate guard as they exited, but they had prepared an excuse beforehand, and thanks to the dazzling smiles from the girls they left without a severe questioning.

And so, the long night ended.

The events of tonight, the people, demons and spirits, signaled the dawn of a new history in the contention of those who vied from the shadows, yet Tatsuya himself was little aware of this at the time.

Epilogue

The excitement could be heard floating on the wind. The grounds of First High School were full of joyful voices. If he strained his ears, it was possible to hear crying voices mingled in with them as well, but those were not necessarily unhappy ones.

In contrast, the cafeteria was barren. There were scattered figures whose number was less than the fingers on both hands. By the way, this did not mean that the students here were playing hooky from classes in session.

Today was the graduation ceremony.

Tatsuya was not using a paper cup; he sipped his coffee from a proper ceramic cup and placed the cup down directly on the table without a saucer (it hadn't had a saucer from the start).

And, he looked down on the multipurpose watch that most magicians did not use.

The time indicated that the ceremony itself was already over.

Those voices were probably the graduates leaving the site of the graduation ceremony, Tatsuya surmised.

Afterward, parties would be held in two small gyms. It gave off an unpleasant feeling that even at a time like this the first and second course students were segregated, but it might be that the people themselves felt more relaxed this way.

To be correct, normally this was not the most suitable thing. But second course students might be somewhat tentative when they were with first course students and first course students might not celebrate as much (primarily, about their entering Magic University) in the presence of the second course students. Because there was no difference between the food, drinks and other stuff, it was probably unnecessary to quibble about the different locations, Tatsuya thought.

However, due to the separated locations, it certainly took more people to do the labor than it should have. Because the contractors assigned to make the facilities and the cafeteria staff that prepared the food for the two sites received an extra bonus, they probably wouldn't complain about the 'superfluous work,' but on the other hand, the Student Council hosting the

graduation parties was on the top of the list of people complaining loudly about the superfluous work.

It was probably understandable.

Tatsuya was waiting for Miyuki, who was extremely busy with the management of today's graduation parties.

It should be added — so that there are no misunderstandings — that he had offered to help with the preparations and management.

And had been repeatedly refused.

Azusa and the rest had clearly wanted the help.

However, Miyuki had determinedly refused Tatsuya's assistance.

"There is no reason to bother Onii-sama with this matter!"

With this emphatic objection to even asking him for the slightest bit of help, Azusa could do nothing but refuse him.

Well, even without his sister's excessive consideration(?), for many of the first course students and not too few second course students, Tatsuya's presence would be slightly awkward.

He was the owner of abilities and achievements that cast doubts on the distinction between the first and second course.

For the third years, he was the rock that threw their final year into confusion. Not taking part was probably the correct move.

Naturally, when it was finally decided that he would not help out with today's parties, there were people who indirectly said things similar to "this is all for the better" and sometimes(?) Mayumi was there when it happened and for some reason she blatantly steamed.

Mayumi had safely been accepted by Magic University. With her proven abilities and achievements, this could be thought of as inevitable; however, even with the damages from 'vampires' abruptly ceasing since that night, she unmistakably had to work harder because she couldn't give the entrance examination her undivided attention.

She would, from April on, study at Magic University with Suzune and Katsuto, who had also been accepted — as was only proper.

Mari had not taken the exam for Magic University. She would be going to the Defense College. She did not give a reason. However, it seemed that she did not inform Mayumi beforehand and he had seen Mayumi make some harsh jibes to Mari about that — perhaps, she was hiding her loneliness.

The Magic University and the Defense College were not really that far apart; if they wanted to meet, they would be able to do so at any time; still, to have the friend — the pair might not like to call each other friends, but everyone else had been labeling them that for some time — you thought was going to attend the same school with you go to a different school instead was probably not something that can be accepted easily.

Speaking of going to the Defense College—

"Shiba."

As Tatsuya was thinking that, a voice called out to him.

"Kobayakawa-senpai, hasn't the party started already?"

This was the very person he had been thinking of.

"Ah, well it has, but I heard from Mari that you were here."

The magic abilities of Kobayakawa had never recovered from the incident at the Nine Schools Competition, even with therapy that risked her life. There was no loss to her sensitivity to magic, but she could not use magic as long as the suspicion 'that she couldn't use magic' was not eradicated.

It seemed that Kobayakawa had resolved to quit school in October.

However, with only half a year left, even if she transferred to a liberal arts or science high school, she clearly would not have enough time to prepare to graduate and prepare for college. It seemed that after transferring, she intended to spend a year as a Ronin and search for a new career path.

"Do you need me for something?"

"Ah, that is, what…naturally, it is difficult to speak of it face to face... But, it's necessary. I want...to say thank you to you."

Tatsuya was comparatively earnest when he looked inquiringly at the red-faced, obviously embarrassed, Kobayakawa.

"I haven't done anything that I deserve Kobayakawa-senpai's thanks for."

"That's not true!"

In the highly unpopulated cafeteria, Kobayakawa's raised voice echoed pretty well. She was not expecting that, and from her downcast head, Tatsuya could see her face becoming slightly redder.

"The suggestion about a path that could make the best use of magic sensitivity and my knowledge about magic even if I couldn't use it was yours, right?"

Tatsuya instantly started to scowl but didn't out of consideration for Kobayakawa's feelings.

"Did Watanabe-senpai let it slip..."

Even so, he could not hide the disgust in his voice.

"Don't say it like that. I forced Mari to spit it out."

"I asked Watanabe-senpai to pretend it was her own idea, yet she told you anyway."

All the third year female representatives to the Nine Schools competition, including Mari and Mayumi, had worried about Kobayakawa. Mari, who had narrowly escaped a similar incident, could not help taking it personally. Kobayakawa's accident had led to the incident involving Hirakawa Chiaki in October, which only increased Mari's worries.

After that incident, Mari had grumbled idle complaints at Tatsuya. She understood it was not his responsibility, but although she prefaced her complaints with that, the gist of her grumbling was 'was there really no way to prevent Kobayakawa's accident.'

Tatsuya had an answer for those doubts.

The answer was 'he couldn't.'

He was not all knowing and all powerful. And even if the 'all powerful' was omitted, he was far from 'all knowing'. It was all he could do to use his observation power to cover the area around himself and Miyuki and take care of the duties he was responsible for, therefore he did not have the freedom to look after others. It was the same for the other members; because neither Kobayakawa herself nor Hirakawa Koharu (the elder of

the Hirakawa sisters) who was responsible for her CAD had been aware of the trick, nobody else had caught it either.

However, it would be awkward to just coldly cut her off like that. So Tatsuya had sent their theoretical discussion down another route.

Tatsuya had heard from Fujibayashi a number of times that there was a dearth of tactical staff that understood how to take magic into consideration for tactical planning. Because there were so few people with a talent for magic, they were normally sent to the frontlines, so inevitably in an actual battle, the staff managing the tactical planning from the rear were all non-magicians who had only a theoretical understanding of magic.

If someone who was a superb magician but could not use magic for some reason was added to the tactical staff, then it would be much easier for the magicians on the frontlines to do their work than it was now. That was the idle complaint from Fujibayashi, who had seen the problems from both the front lines and in the rear, to Tatsuya. He had relayed that to Mari without naming who he had heard it from.

"Well, she tried to keep it from me. But, it didn't seem like Mari was all that interested in hiding it."

"Geez, that girl..."

"I am glad she told me."

Kobayakawa's sincere words interrupted Tatsuya's statement expressing his annoyance.

"I wasn't aware of it myself, but until I heard those words I was in a state of despair. I said 'do you think this will defeat me,' but it was a bluff, thinking that way was only to fool myself into not admitting that I already felt defeated."

Kobayakawa's eyes watered; she was probably remembering how she was back then.

"But, when I heard that news from Mari, I felt like my eyes were truly opened. I thought 'this is the road I must follow.' This way I would not be left behind alone; it gave me hope that I would not be cut off from my fellow students that I had walked the road to become a magician with. In the eleventh hour, my life path suddenly changed; I thought that if I tried hard for just half a year, I could pass."

Kobayakawa's face was once again red, undoubtedly she was embarrassed by the statements coming from her mouth.

Tatsuya did not feel the statements he heard were particularly embarrassing, but,

"So, Shiba, no, Shiba-kun, thank you."

Kobayakawa's tone changed to a polite one as she bowed deeply.

Tatsuya was not so impudent as to sit while he was bowed to.

He got up from his chair and clicked his heels together.

Kobayakawa was not the only one who lifted her head up at the sudden sound of the clicked shoes; he accumulated the gazes of all of the small number of students in the cafeteria, but Tatsuya ignored that as something not worth paying attention to as he delivered the salute of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

"Shiba-kun..."

"Kobayakawa-senpai. It is trite, but good luck."

As he answered her with a salute, Tatsuya said that without embarrassment or laughter.

Tears swelled in Kobayakawa's eyes once more however, and she nodded with a smile without crying.

"Senpai, the party has started."

"Yes, it has. Well then, goodbye. Good luck to you too!"

As she said goodbye and trotted off, Tatsuya sat down.

Mysteriously, the lukewarm coffee did not taste inferior.

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"Onii-sama, sorry for making you wait."

When the lively voice called out to him, Tatsuya took his eyes off the portable information terminal he was in the midst of writing a paper on and looked up.

"Tatsuya-kun, what are you writing?"

The one who had called out to him and made him look up was not Miyuki; it was a broadly grinning Mayumi with the roll of her diploma — as expected, the school used paper — clasped to her breast.

"I'm just writing some notes related to lengthening the time of continuous magic by systematic assistance."

"...Um, I didn't think it was a fruitless topic like that."

Tatsuya stopped before replying to Mari, who looked at him with a stunned look, and simply lightly shrugged his shoulders. He thought about complaining to her about the Kobayakawa incident, but today was their day. With that thought in mind, he restrained himself from trivial sniping.

"More importantly, why are all of you together? I didn't think either Saegusa-senpai or Watanabe-senpai wouldn't have been invited to the after party."

From behind the backs of the female students, who were looking at each other, Katsuto's face abruptly appeared.

"We thought we would say goodbye to you before that."

"...That's thoughtful of you. If you hadn't purposely come to see me, I was going to come and say my goodbyes afterwards."

"Oh, really? Because Tatsuya is hiding away from the parties here, I thought you would pretend not to know us and just leave."

Even though he knew that Mayumi's sullen face and outpouring of complaints were an act, Tatsuya still felt like he had to give her an explanation.

"I am not even a member of the student council, so I shouldn't show up at the graduation party right? Especially the first course party."

"What!"

Suddenly an intense exclamation interrupted the explanation Tatsuya was framing.

A shiny blonde head of hair pushed through the graduates to appear in front of Tatsuya.

"Why was I, who am not even a proper member of the Student Council, made to help with the party, when it's all right for Tatsuya, a member of the Public Morals Committee, to do nothing!?"

The one who flared up at Tatsuya and insolently spelled out her workload was Lina.

"...Public Morals Committee members are not Student Council members. Besides, although it is only temporary, aren't you a member of the Student Council?"

"I just don't get it!"

Lina was probably not all that bothered by the graduates' stares. In front of the bewildered Mayumi and the others, Lina was her usual self.

"Hey Lina, don't say rude things to Onii-sama."

And, she was faced(?) with the usual speech of Miyuki's love for her brother.

No, perhaps it should be said that it was Miyuki's usual love for her brother speech.

"You are a temporary member of the Student Council and Onii-sama is a member of the Public Morals Committee, this was all settled before the preparations for the party started. In the first place, why are you grumbling about it now — weren't you all fired up?"

Tatsuya did not know what she meant by 'fired up,' but unquestionably, Lina turned red before the gazes she had accumulated.

"Miyuki, what do you mean by fired up?"

Tatsuya did not have the option of 'not daring to ask what happened' at this place.

"Tatsuya, it's nothing!"

"Well, as you know it would be deplorable to give a temporary officer of the Student Council, Lina, the type of work that would take a lot of time so we put her in charge of today's entertainment, but…"

"Miyuki!"

"Even if we said entertainment, we didn't say she had to do some kind of performance — it would have been alright if all she did was get volunteers from the graduates and the other students, but,"

"Miyuki, stop talking!"

"Lina apparently misunderstood."

"Miyuki, please! Don't say it!"

Lina desperately tried to interrupt Miyuki's discourse, but the amused Mayumi and Mari cleverly blocked her movements.

"So?"

Miyuki was looking at Lina, distracted by the desperation in her voice; however, at Tatsuya's prompting, she readily switched her gaze back to her brother.

"She took the stage as the lead singer of a band. She stood up there and sang about ten songs, she was very enthusiastic."

"Yes, it was an extremely fine performance. Not inferior to a professional talent."

Mari added to Miyuki's explanation, and,

"It's true. Shields-san is a very good singer. She has an incredible voice."

In a not-all-that-complimentary tone, Mayumi praised Lina's singing.

"Urk..."

Lina looked down, red-faced in shame.

It was not an angry face, it was clearly an embarrassed face.

Looking at that made Tatsuya feel like smiling.

"I see...you've made some good memories, Lina."

"...I don't care."

Aside from Lina, the people let out genial laughter at her speaking rudely and turning away.

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(That was the last I saw of Lina.)

After graduation was over, Lina didn't come to school.

When he asked Miyuki, she had given class A the explanation of 'she was busy with preparations to return home.'

Nonetheless, he thought a withdrawal order had probably come in since that incident. Even so, until that day, Lina had continued attending school and she probably hadn't done it to fulfill her assigned role as a high school student or prepare for the graduation party.

It could be that she did it so she could enjoy the life of a high school student a little.

—As he looked at the arrival and departure delay announcement, Tatsuya mused over that.

The day before yesterday, the third quarter had ended.

In short, the first year of his high school life had ended.

Tatsuya's grades were predictable.

His marks in theory were extremely good.

His marks in technical were pretty bad.

His combined marks was in the lower middle.

However, he wasn't bothered by that.

In that year he had continued to get entangled in various troubles, but he had steadily approached his goal.

Contrary to his expectations, he was able to build good friendships.

Even taking into account the negative aspect of getting involved in a string of incidents, it could be said to be an excellent first year.

Today, he had come to the Tokyo Bay floating international airport to welcome one of those friends back.

Of course, he was not alone.

Miyuki and Honoka were to his left and right; Leo, Erika, Mikihiko and Mizuki sat across from him.

The plane Shizuku was on was supposed to arrive in a little less than an hour.

"As I thought, it takes time to get here from the American mainland."

From Tatsuya's left, Miyuki spoke to him, and,

"It seems like it takes a military plane less than four minutes to cross the Pacific Ocean, so why does it take this long for a civilian plane?"

on his right side, Honoka asked him.

Thereupon,

"The engines are different. Because military planes can go above the stratosphere. Safety and economy are a priority for civilian planes."

Leo interjected from directly across from him,

"Oh my, you're well informed. Despite being a barbarian a horse could kick."

Erika teased.

"Why you!"

"Leo, restrain yourself."

"Erika-chan, you too, stop constantly teasing him."

And Mikihiko and Mizuki interceded into their strife, well, as they usually did.

Just then, Tatsuya spotted a familiar gleam of gold among the crowd of people in the lobby.

His friends looked up at Tatsuya who quickly stood, wondering what was up.

Miyuki promptly stood up too.

Although a little slower, she had also spotted the same thing as Tatsuya.

Miyuki followed Tatsuya, who had walked away with a short announcement of "I won't be long."

A flustered Honoka also stood up, but for some reason Erika, who was seating directly in front of her, grabbed the sleeve of her spring coat.

"Honoka, don't interfere. Because it is a farewell to a rival."

Before the gaze of Erika, who was impolitely twisting around in her seat,

Lina, who of course hadn't fled after being spotted by Tatsuya, walked towards the siblings herself.

"Tatsuya, Miyuki, have you come to see me off?"

When they had approached close enough to speak to each other normally, Lina spoke first.

"Well. Meeting you here was a coincidence."

Lina's momentary brooding completely disappeared as she let out a genuine laugh.

However, she did not feel completely the same as she had been. A shadow of doubt could be seen in her eyes that hadn't been there when she had just barely arrived in Japan. That showed that in this brief period she had become more mature.

"Oh my? Did I not say I was departing today?"

"We didn't hear you say it."

Miyuki finished off Lina's exaggeratedly mild befuddled banter in one blow.

Even so, Miyuki wasn't in a bad mood, and she was smiling in a wry way.

"Well, joking aside. I am obliged for the aid of you two."

Lina's smile became brazen as she said it,

"Don't you mean, we've caused you trouble?"

and Tatsuya smoothly denied it.

"I'm the one who is in trouble. ...You're an unbending person to the end, Tatsuya."

"You wouldn't be happy if I went easy on you Lina... Besides, this isn't the end, right?"

Lina shrugged her shoulders at Tatsuya's question.

"I think it might be. I don't think I am able to easily leave my own country."

Lina's voice showed tinges of acknowledging a painful truth.

However, to erase that,

"But, this is not the last time."

Miyuki interjected with emphatic words.

"Miyuki."

"So I shall not say goodbye, Lina."

"...Miyuki, what was that — it sounded like a confession?"

Lina widened her eyes as she stared at Miyuki with a face that had grown mischievous.

"Hmm, I suppose it might be a type of confession. You are my rival, Lina."

Miyuki was undisturbed by the remark and made that declaration in an unwavering voice.

"You will surely reach out to take Onii-sama's hand someday. You will surely become Onii-sama's ally. And that will begin our true competition. And so, I will not say goodbye. Until we meet again, Lina."

Lina's eyes widened again. And this time her gentle smile was like the sun matching the color of her eyes and hair.

"I can't understand what you said very well, but... Miyuki, surely it will be as you said. Now, I have that premonition as well. Until we meet again Miyuki, Tatsuya."

"I'm back."

One hour after Lina disappeared into the gate, these were Shizuku's first words.

"Welcome back, Shizuku!"

Over the back of the moist-eyed Honoka embracing her, which she was patting to soothe her, Shizuku directed her eyes to Tatsuya.

"Welcome back, Shizuku. I'm glad you came back safely."

"Yes."

Her curt replies hadn't changed from before her study abroad, but,

"Shizuku, your aura has changed."

"That's true. It has become more grown-uppish."

As Miyuki and Erika said, the aura coating her body had become fairly mature.

"Did you undergo some kind of sinful experiences?"

"Erika-chan!?"

The one who responded to the broadly grinning Erika's jibes was Mizuki; Shizuku, the one under attack, only tilted her head slightly.

It was unchanged from what had been the normal commotion; however, a stronger sense of composure could be felt.

"Tatsuya-san."

"Hmm?"

After Honoka finally released Shizuku from her embrace and allowed her to step away from her, Shizuku walked in front of Tatsuya and looked up at his face.

"I have many things I want to talk about. I also have been given many messages from Ray. Will you listen?"

"Good. I will certainly listen."

Perhaps, her souvenirs from America were a lot of insights.

That was what Tatsuya thought.

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Their talk with Shizuku took a pretty long time.

Even so, they weren't able to finish discussing everything.

They could not discuss Raymond Clark's message in front of their other friends.

(It might be necessary to take her up on her invitation to her house…)

In order to relate the remaining message, Shizuku had invited Tatsuya and Miyuki to her own house. To go to the great industrialist, Kitayama Ushio's, private residence without their other friends.

Even for the Yotsuba, this was not a minor thing to have.

However, they could not choose to not accept the invitation. The information she had returned with was necessary to decide their future course of action.

Tatsuya was reexamining the predetermined conclusion once again in the living room of his own home.

At that time, the buzzer rang.

A shocked cry from Miyuki, who had answered the door's intercom, reached Tatsuya's ears.

Miyuki's face displayed surprise and impatience when she came to Tatsuya.

"Um, Onii-sama, there's a guest..."

"Should I meet the guest?"

Tatsuya had gotten up because he thought it was some kind of uninitiated guest, however—

"No, I didn't invite her, but... the guest is Sakurai Minami-chan who I met at the Yotsuba main house."

"What...?"

Tatsuya also remembered that maid girl.

Sakurai Honami. The former Metropolitan Police SP who was his late mother's Guardian. The woman who had poured love out to the two siblings as easily as if she was an elder sister or a relative. Three years before in the summer in that battle in Okinawa, the augmented magician had lost her life protecting Tatsuya. The girl's features were completely like the person the siblings could never forget.

She was a visitor completely unexpected to even Tatsuya.

In front of Tatsuya, with Miyuki at his side, was a girl in a spring-like pastel one piece dress.

After Sakurai Minami politely bowed, she passed a single envelope to Tatsuya.

Tatsuya invited Minami to sit and sat down on the sofa himself. As she watched, he cut the seal and sent his eyes to the letter inside prompted by her gaze.

As he continued to read, Tatsuya felt as though an illusionary pain was spreading in his mouth.

The sender was Yotsuba Maya.

After the perfunctory seasonal greeting, the letter read thus:

"This Spring, Minami-chan will be enrolled in First High school.

In regards to this, please give Minami-chan accommodations in your home.

She has become a good housekeeper; she already possesses enough skill.

You must need help around the house; after all you purchased a maid robot, right? In any case, you and Miyuki-san both are going to be busy with various things now that you two are becoming second year high school students.

She has been informed that she will work as a live-in maid so please do not have any scruples about ordering her about.

Also, I intend to have Minami-chan learn the work of a Guardian.

As her senpai, please teach her many things."

He felt as though he could hear his Aunt's high-pitched laugh from the face of the page.

Tatsuya folded up the letter and returned it to the envelope, then placed it on the table; perhaps she could tell something from his behaviour, thus Miyuki said "Onii-sama?" to him in an anxious voice.

Tatsuya took one deep breath and passed the letter to Miyuki.

After a small wait, the sound of air being gulped emitted from Miyuki's throat.

Minami stood next to the wall facing her as if she was waiting for Miyuki's eyes to leave the letter.

"I am a novice, but please accept me. As Oku-sama stated, please use me to the fullest."

Minami deeply lowered her head.

Even though they understood she was the linchpin of an invasion from Maya, neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki could reject a girl who had the same face as Honami.

Armored behind his poker face, Tatsuya could do nothing more than nod at his Aunt's bitterly ironic 'present.'

—In April, the new school year would begin and it would be even richer in mayhem than the previous one—

That unwelcome premonition would not disappear from its resting place in Tatsuya's chest.

[The end of the first year volumes]

The Ojou-sama's Magnificent(?) Day Off

Common Era 2095, November 2. Throughout the nation, a triumphant mood was felt.

The evening of the day before yesterday, the news had reported that the defense force had eliminated the Great Asian Alliance's forward base and armada with their secret weapon. The latest news flowing through the living room late yesterday evening was that North Tokyo had asked Washington to put out feelers as an intermediary of peace. This development had occurred way too quickly, so there were those who did not consider the report to be all that reliable, but only a small percentage of the population maintained the ability to make unruffled judgement.

Much of the population had abruptly become commentators on military affairs — boys who would normally have no interest in politics talked about diplomacy and pragmatic power politics in loud voices at schools.

To the girls' apparent shock, disapproving glares at a time like this had no power to restrain them.

This was not limited to school. Sighing at the high spirited, irresponsible celebrity on the screen, Saegusa Mayumi switched the television off.

The current time was 10am. Since today was a weekday, she would usually be at school at this time. However, students of every magic high school involved in the Yokohama incident had continued to be given a break from school since yesterday, and First High School was no exception.

As someone preparing to take her exams at the beginning of the new year, taking a break from being drilled on the subjects she was studying certainly caused complicated feelings in her heart, but she wasn't someone who had been involved just because she was at the scene. Mayumi had been actually involved, so it was good for her to take a break. "Unfortunately, she could not relax.

<Ojou-sama, please forgive this interruption of your rest>[11]

She realized that she had turned off the TV, right?

The extremely good timing of the housekeeper's voice that could be heard from the intercom was mere coincidence — Mayumi was fully aware of that even as she mused over the possibility.

"I'll open the door right now."

She replied as she stood up from her chair. Actually, she could have unlocked it by giving a command to the voice recognition interface of the Home Automation Robot, but for no particular reason, Mayumi opened the door herself.

In front of the door was the housekeeper in charge of looking after Mayumi. Even now, there is an extensively supported subculture of people who wear a uniform and are called a word starting with M and ending in D. ...Well, the skirt was calf length, the collar concealed the region below the neck, and there were no large uncovered parts in the back, so this was a functional uniform.

Besides, in this house, the existence of a housekeeper wearing this kind of uniform is not strange in the least. After all this time, there was no way it should feel unusual at all.

"What is it?"

Mayumi asked the housekeeper, who was about halfway into her twenties.

"Danna-sama[12] has summoned you."

When she heard this, Mayumi grimaced slightly. 'Again?' she thought.

Despite being questioned on what happened over and over just yesterday... while Mayumi grumbled in her mind, the next words made her tilt her head.

"He is waiting in the reception room."

Even though it was described as a head tilt, this was a private gesture made only in her mind.

—The reception room? Not the study?

That was a question that Mayumi had.

"Is there a guest?"

"It seems so."

It could not be said that they had been together for a long time, but roughly speaking, it was her companion's job to be extremely helpful to Mayumi.

From the short exchange, Mayumi understood that the woman did not know the guest's name.

"Please inform him that I will come after I change my clothes."

"Shall I help you change your clothes?"

After considering it for a moment, Mayumi immediately made an intuitive decision. Modern fashion did not present many opportunities to wear dresses that could not be put on by oneself.

"It will be all right. I will present myself in properly formal attire."

In short, the housekeeper had probably been ordered to make sure of that. As usual, the housekeeper respectfully bowed and withdrew when Mayumi gave her answer.

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The tailored one piece dress she wore was in a light color, with an ankle length skirt that protruded slightly near the vicinity of the thigh. After she adjusted the lace on the hem, Mayumi knocked on the door of the reception room.

"Enter."

The voice that seemed to come from the room was her father's recorded voice from a speaker installed within the decorated wood door. The recorded voice was almost indistinguishable from his living voice and told family members that they needed to be formal.

Apparently, today's guests were people they couldn't be very open with.

"Pardon me."

Wearing her usual two layer thick mask of a lady, Mayumi uttered the cliché phrase in a low tone and slowly entered the room.

With her eyes cast down, she peeked at the guests' faces.

The man and woman seated in front of her father both had faces she knew. Even so, they were not the type of acquaintances she particularly welcomed. Nonetheless, she did not particularly hate them either.

However, she did not show any of her true feelings as she stood beside her father with a smiling face and made a graceful bow to their guests.

"Welcome, Hirofumi-san. Mio-san, it has been a while since I last saw you."

Before the girl replied, the young man stood up.

Nevertheless, the woman with the appearance of a young girl remained seated. And no one raised their eyebrows at this.

They were not maintaining poker faces; neither Mayumi nor her father, Koichi, considered this disrespectful.

As for why the woman, Itsuwa Mio, wasn't sitting on a sofa: she was sitting in a wheelchair.

However her brother, Itsuwa Hirofumi, seemed to feel guilty about it; even though they didn't consider it rude, his return greeting was slightly inarticulate.

"I hope we haven't called at a bad time, Mayumi-san."

"Please have a seat. After all, Mio-san is already seated."

"Thank you very much, Mayumi-san. I am sorry for waiting so long between visits."

It felt like the person being discussed, Mio, had become defiant instead, when she answered Mayumi's words with a laugh and a cherubic smile.

While Hirofumi seated himself lightly on the sofa, as she asked him to, Mayumi was gripped with the same doubt, "Is this person really older than me?" that she always felt when she was face to face with Mio.

It was an indisputable fact that Itsuwa Mio had turned twenty-six this year. However, whenever the actual person was in her field of vision, she couldn't help wanting to doubt that truth.

Her height was only an inch or two shorter than Mayumi's own; however, their figures were completely different. Her body could be described in one word — undeveloped. There wasn't much about her body that could be called 'womanly.'

To be truthful, she could still move her legs. But because of her extremely weak constitution, her body could not endure walking for a long period.

She started using a wheelchair around the time she turned twenty, however, because her body had been too weak to exercise for a long enough period of time. Her appetite was small, which meant that she didn't get enough nourishment, which made her body weak in a vicious circle. Her undeveloped figure was a result of that.

There was very little bulge in her chest area that could be seen while she was clothed. Calling her completely flat wouldn't be much of an exaggeration. Her hip area was also as thin as a young girl's. Mio's body looked like it belonged to someone around the age of thirteen.

Her facial features matched the youthful appearance of her body. Her style of clothing completely fit her physical features, and somehow gave off no hint of 'womanliness.'

However her childish looks didn't matter; Mio hadn't made any outings after she had graduated from college and had made special arrangements to take most of her college classes online, so why on earth had she come here today? Secretly, in her mind, Mayumi was scratching her head in puzzlement with the thought of 'I don't think she is merely accompanying Hirofumi by any means, though.'

"We came to say goodbye to you, today."

When Mio broke that news, Mayumi's gaze clouded with disbelief — or to be correct, she was mystified by the preceding statement.

"Are you returning to your family's main estate?"

To conceal any obvious turmoil — but she had no need to feel upset — Mayumi replied with a question.

The Itsuwa clan's main seat was in the Ehime prefecture, but because Mio needed to commute to university, she had left and come to Tokyo to live her life in one of their other residences. Because her younger brother, Hirofumi, started college just after she graduated, the two lived together.

"I will return to the main house; however, before that—"

Mio cut off her words in a formal manner to hide her inner laughter; Hirofumi was purposely changing his expression, bringing his brows together sullenly.

"We will be going to the front."

"The front... you're going into battle!?"

When the meaning of the words 'the front' sank into her brain, Mayumi raised her voice without thinking.

"—Please excuse my rudeness. But why..."

Mayumi promptly apologized for her impropriety and looked at Mio and her father with confused eyes.

"The public announcement will be made next week, but the official decision has been made."

The answer came from her father.

"Mio and her brother are going to stay for a while at the Sasebo Naval base; from there they will go west with the navy by sea. Their destination is something we don't know; however, their purpose is to urge the Great Asian Alliance to conclude a peace treaty by making a show of force. ...It probably doesn't need to be said, but until the official announcement is made, not a word to anyone."

"Yes, I understand that."

Mayumi readily agreed with her father's admonishment. Naturally, she was only agreeing to the 'not a word to anyone' part.

She understood the reason why the military would deploy Mio. The woman was one of only thirteen publicly acknowledged Strategic Magicians in the world, of which there were said to be probably fewer than fifty in total, the rest of whom were hidden. The Japanese government publicly admitted to having only one user of Strategic Class Magic.

The woman's Strategic Class Magic 'Abyss' was a specialized naval attack, but it could also be used effectively on land. Just by having her accompany them, they should be able to apply tremendous pressure on the enemy.

However, even so, she felt that it wasn't a very rational move at this time. The forefront of the invasion had been launched against the Yokohama coastal region and the military's actions at the time had wreaked havoc on the Korean peninsula, which had actually brought an end to the October 31st stage of the conflict. As long as they weren't going to pursue territorial concessions, a counter invasion was already strategically unnecessary. There was no need to say that she felt the demerits of going as far as sending Mio out for several weeks in her condition, even with all the thorough preparation, were greater than the merits.

It was not clear enough to put into words in her mind, but Mayumi felt a general uneasiness.

"I will also be going with my elder sister."

He was probably gripped with similar feelings of dissatisfaction. However, this was a government decision which the head of the Itsuwa clan accepted, and could not be overturned by Hirofumi. He was someone who could be chosen as the next head of the Itsuwa clan, but he was not yet the 'next head'; at this stage, the situation could not be changed by any objections he raised. His decision to at least accompany his elder sister in order to help her showed in Hirofumi's face.

"The truth is..."

Perhaps desiring to change the ambience brought about by her brother's mood, Mio's tone switched to a joking one.

"I did want to see Mayumi-san become my brother's bride however."

This certainly resulted in a change in the mood. —Nonetheless, it was in the opposite direction of what she intended.

This remark, unfortunately, continued the previous topic and no one laughed at what was commonly called a 'death omen' type of joke.

"Nee-san."

"...I'm sorry."

Within the increasingly serious atmosphere, Mio gave a mournful cry and become completely crestfallen.

"Ah, well, we'll take up that conversation once again when Hirofumi-kun returns."

Due to his feelings of responsibility as a host, Koichi promptly covered up the gaffe and returned the weak smile to Mio's face; as a result of the paucity of choices for their expressions, Mayumi and Hirofumi went expressionless.

There was a reason Mayumi did not give a 'it's been a while' to Hirofumi. This was the reason Mayumi's thoughts scattered when it turned out that Mio was not simply accompanying Hirofumi.

Hirofumi was one of the candidates to become Mayumi's betrothed. However, since Hirofumi was the eldest son of the Itsuwa Clan, it might be better to say Mayumi was one of the candidates to become Hirofumi's betrothed. They were both direct descendants of the Ten Master Clans and close in age; one was an heir and one was the eldest daughter of the main family with an elder brother who was the principal heir — the conditions could be called quite favorable.

To tell the truth, the conditions were the same with the Juumonji clan's Katsuto, and Koichi was thinking about which one he wanted to marry Mayumi off to. (The Ichijou clan's Masaki was excluded because he was younger than Mayumi.)

Of course, the people in question had their own opinions on the matter and there were other arranged marriage talks that hadn't quite become engagements; however, Mayumi and Hirofumi often dined together and went to the theater together in a family setting with both the Saegusa and Itsuwa clans. —Despite the expectations of the adults, the pair themselves weren't interested, hence the mutual poker faces.

However, always 'silently going along' only made their moods worsen, which was something Mayumi knew quite well.

"By the way, when do you leave?"

With the redirected flow of conversation, a relieved atmosphere that could not quite be concealed arose — Mayumi was dissatisfied with this weakness — and Hirofumi answered.

"We go to Sasebo at the end of this week; I heard that the ship departs Friday of next week."

As for Mayumi, while she was preoccupied with her unhappiness, she did not forget to learn the details.

"Those are certainly quick arrangements... Well, please take care. We will await your safe return."

Impeccably disguised behind her cat's mask, Mayumi leaned forward in her seat.

"Thank you."

Mayumi turned her gaze to her own toes and considered that they were probably done with her.

"Before we leave to go to the front, could we have Mayumi-san's assistance…"

Hence when she heard Hirofumi say this, it was a little difficult for her to control the speed with which she looked up.

"My assistance?"

While implicitly expressing the opinion that 'there is nothing I can do for you', she deliberately tilted her head in a childish manner. Her rock-like classmate would probably pay it no mind and her mature — she would call him 'impertinent' — underclassman would see through it and look at her with pretended boredom, but Hirofumi quit trying to conceal his unrest and let his eyes water.

"No, rather than assistance, we want you to lend us your insight."

However, it didn't work on Mio. Was it because her effect was predictably weaker on her own sex, or maybe because Mio looked so young herself, that she saw her as an 'older woman'.

"Mayumi-san has already been informed, which will make this a quick conversation. We don't have enough time for a preliminary investigation."

"That's true. I understand."

Mio appeared distressed to her core, with her hand on her cheek. Certainly, her speech and manner invoked some feeling that she was an older woman. Nevertheless, the impression that she was a child overreaching herself was strong — she roused amusement rather than

interest. However, that did not make Mayumi relax; she concealed her wariness as she agreed with Mio.

"Magic is resisted by magic. Magicians by magicians. That, I think, is surely what we have in common."

Hirofumi continued; receiving his sister's support(?), his calm had returned. By 'in common', he unquestionably meant between Japan and the Great Asian Alliance. With that interpretation, Mayumi waited for his next words.

"I will be accompanying my sister; the other side has undoubtedly realized this."

Mayumi concurred with Hirofumi's statement and displayed her agreement. In the first place, the Japanese side had no intention of concealing Mio's deployment; besides Mio and Hirofumi's full identities, their membership as officers deployed in war and capabilities were well known. So under the circumstances they were expected.

In order for a checkmate to be effective, you had to let your opponent know about it. In other words, a secret weapon is not good material to get your adversary to negotiate a compromise.

"The other side understands it is at a disadvantage in naval combat with Nee-san's Abyss. Therefore, we anticipate a counter attack combining aerial combat power with magic."

The Movement type-Strategic Class Magic 'Abyss' was a magic capable of creating a spherical depression capable of extending from a few tens of meters to several kilometers. Vessels caught within the magical zone at sea slide down the steep walls of water, tumbling about; then, upon cancellation of the magic, are swallowed up by massive waves as the sea returns to a horizontal plane. The hemisphere can be created up to a kilometer in depth, easily catching submerged submarines as well.

If the distance between the two adversaries was too close, the water movements could cause damage to one's own side as well. The Strategic Magic Mio possessed, with its great range, could be called the natural enemy of naval power.

However, at the same time, Mio's 'Abyss' was completely powerless against an air force. She couldn't invoke it without a continuous water surface, and to use it on land, she had to know beforehand that there was

a subterranean source of water she could use — there were various conditions for its use.

With the enemy's battle formation that Hirofumi spoke of, she had no other option.

"The air forces will be left to the JDSF; we must think of how to deal with the magicians."

This was also a fact she could not dispute.

In form and substance, the magician community headed by the Ten Master Clans within Japan — whether they were magicians attached to the government, attached to the military, or attached to a civilian institution, modern magicians or sorcerers of ancient magic — were self reliant. The magicians who would probably be accompanying the military were included in that 'we.'

"Mayumi-san, did you see our magician allies repulse the enemy and enemy magic at Yokohama? I would like you to tell us about the aspects of the enemy magic you saw and the effective magic that was used against it."

Actually, this was a difficult, dangerous question. She did not doubt the necessity of providing information and she would not refuse to do things she could not refuse to do. —That was how it was.

"...Even though I saw enemy magic, I was always in the rear, and the only time I actually crossed swords with them was when I was attacking from a helicopter."

Actually she had directly contributed to the destruction of a tank twice, but Mayumi was not intentionally lying. It simply had not left an impression.

He did not doubt Mayumi's words; however, Hirofumi was not satisfied with her answer.

"Then you were assisting with the civilian evacuation until the end."

By 'civilian,' he meant the non-magicians. Magicians were recognized as a special existence; usually Mayumi felt sorry for both sides of the narrow view that people that weren't magicians were powerless. However, this was not the time to point that out.

"Til the end would be wrong, but... while I was waiting for the copter, students from my year and below held them off."

"Then can't you introduce us to these people? The First High School students who actually fought against the Great Asian Alliance's magicians."

When Hirofumi said it, right away he came to mind. The mature, impudent, yet reliable underclassman. The first year who changed a gigantic truck into dust, was encased by glittering psions, and used a miraculous healing method.

Nonetheless, immediately afterward, nearly simultaneously, the recalled words 'National Secret' paralyzed her tongue.

"Mayumi-san?"

The faltering Mayumi was being examined by Mio's suspicious eyes. Mio was not the only one looking at her suspiciously. Hirofumi — and anyway her father — were looking at her with doubt, and Mayumi recognized their impatience.

"Ah, no… that's right. If you visit the Juumonji family, I think you will hear a thorough report."

"Do you mean Katsuto-kun..."

Hirofumi was by no means an unpleasant person; naturally he was a nice boy, but Mayumi had felt for some time that actually meant a little too agreeable.

She knew Hirofumi felt inferior and competitive with the boy two years younger than him and understood it to be natural. However, at this point in time, she didn't feel displaying jealousy was all that praiseworthy.

—Not only that, but letting a younger female discern it.

The 'passable' grades she had put for him on one sheet of the report card in her heart were all insincere.

"The others, who should be useful... would probably be the Hundred Families' Watanabe Mari, Isori Kei, and Chiyoda Kanon. I will contact them all for you."

"Please do."

Well, if all you do is find fault with your associate, you will not feel good either.

Mayumi gave them the names and promised to set up the meetings in a businesslike fashion.

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Afterward, she called Mari, Kei, and Kanon right then and there (Katsuto wasn't home), she set up appointments with all of them and, along with her father, saw the Itsuwa siblings off.

Mayumi really wanted to sigh when they left, but peeping at her father's face told her it would be a little while before she was set free.

"Mayumi, I want to talk a little; you don't mind do you?"

As she had expected, just as she returned from the hotel sized porch to the entrance hall you could probably dance in, Koichi called out to Mayumi to stop.

"Let's talk in the study."

He quickly walked away without waiting for an answer.

Koichi presented an outward appearance of an elite businessman of the middle of the last century. Anyone would say his health was fragile — his face was more sociable than dignified and the tone of his voice was gentle to match that, but like all the other heads of the Ten Master Clans, no member of his family would disagree with Saegusa Koichi.

And it was not Mayumi's style to take a meaningless rebellious attitude. While wearing a long-sleeved stiff one-piece that she normally wouldn't wear, Mayumi trailed after her father's back.

The study had a classic bookcase, a massive desk, and a single leather chair. Koichi promptly sat down, forcing Mayumi to listen to her father's words while standing. Since this is what he always did, Mayumi was not bothered by it.

"There were no first year students in the list of names you gave, Mayumi."

Koichi broached the subject with his daughter who was standing about two meters away from him without preliminaries.

"Didn't I hear that the daughter of the Chiba Clan and the second son of the Yoshida Clan played an active role?"

Mayumi murmured 'Raccoon[13] Dad' in her head. Koichi's physique was more fox than raccoon and more wolf than fox, however, Mayumi was confident that her father couldn't tell what she was thinking from her outer appearance.

"Despite that, they are still first years, so I didn't think they could explain things well to Hirofumi-san and Mio-san."

(Nevertheless, he probably got the details from Nakura-san.)

While watching her father murmur 'I see,' Mayumi thought that. In general, this is the same as the harsh 'cross-examination' she received just yesterday; his persistence was more hunting dog than raccoon, she cursed in her head.

"However, didn't they make unthinkable great strides for first years? Especially that girl who also played a very active role in the Nine Schools Competition—"

"You mean Miyuki-san?"

"That's right, Shiba Miyuki-kun."

She felt as though the frames of the lightly tinted glasses he wore for show were emitting a sparkling light. These spectacles were supposedly to conceal the fact that his right eye was a false eye; however, because they didn't contain any special gimmick for doing so, Mayumi had her doubts about that.

"She seemed like a very excellent girl. A vice president in the newly seated student council and, if all goes properly, she will become student council president like you, Mayumi."

"Yes, she's a very excellent child. In addition to being a very beautiful child."

"Oh, that's what she looks like in Mayumi's eyes?"

"Do you mean even from a female's perspective? Yea, I think Miyuki-san's beauty is obvious to either sex."

Koichi's lips twitched a little.

No trace of lust could be seen in the left eye inside the glasses.

Such a thing especially sparked Mayumi's wariness.

"Be that as it may… managing to use magic of such high degree of difficulty as 'Inferno' and 'Niflheim'... I'd like to meet her once. Can't you introduce her to our family?"

"Aaah... I'll have to ask about that."

"That's right, couldn't you ask about that for me? Come to think of it, I'm fairly certain that Miyuki has an elder brother? Didn't you say that he helped you out Mayumi, at the Nine Schools Competition? This is a good chance; I will give him my thanks at the same time — it would be good if you invited both of them."

The polite smile would not let her read what was going on in his head. The tinted lenses would not let her catch the anticipation in his pupils.
—However, she had known him since she was born. She was already eighteen years old — their relationship was no longer one where only one side found the other transparent.

(This was what he was aiming at...!)

Certainly, Mayumi had made Nakura promise to keep the secret in the helicopter. The episode concerning Tatsuya's special magic hadn't reached her father's ears.

However, she didn't think he had not told him anything.

She was not that optimistic.

Nakura was a sly old fox — he had probably given his employer hints without breaching his agreement to keep it secret, and her father, who was a veteran of countless battles, would be able to acquire much information from that.

Her father was suspicious of him — Shiba Tatsuya.

Additionally, it seemed to be about 'something' unknown even to herself.

Within Mayumi, the desire to find out also smoldered, but even now, the feeling that she should avoid touching this mystery was still stronger.

She unconsciously feared touching this mystery would destroy their current relationship.

"I'll try asking..."

It took everything she had to make that answer.

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The head of the Saegusa Clan secluded himself for a while in the study, looking at the desk, when the small sound of a knock on the door caused him to look up.

"Enter."

The door to the study was different from the door to the reception room; it didn't have a speaker built into it. According to common sense, a quiet sound like a whisper shouldn't pass through the massive door and walls from the hallway.

However, the knock didn't repeat and the door opened without a sound.

The one who entered was an elderly man with carefully brushed white hair, Nakura the butler.

"Your report?"

The question was a little too fragmentary, but Nakura walked closer as his master indicated and respectfully offered a memory card.

Koichi set the paper card with the data printed in a detailed pattern on the micrometer level into the scanner and called up the decoded document to the wide display on the desk.

"The 101 Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion... bothersome. Certainly, this is the unit the Yotsuba are zealously approaching?"

"It seems they are in frequent contact, but their goal is unknown."

"I think there is only one reason we would have for contacting the military?"

When Koichi said 'we,' he wasn't limiting himself to the Saegusa Clan or the Ten Master Clans — he meant all the magicians in the country in general.

The magicians of this nation did not want status. The Ten Master Clans endorsed by the nation were prohibited from acquiring 'formal' political power.

Instead, there was administration, the military, the police and the financial world; in various aspects, the ones who held political power needed the sponsorship of magical skills to continue their personal power base. To not be treated as disposable tools, to be tools that continued to be used, they had made themselves indispensable tools and had risen to the position of servants who manipulated their masters. For this purpose, 'to be able to continually be used' by them, it was necessary 'to become necessary' and temporary alliances were needed.

In order to gain that, ability was not enough.

A sharp sword produced a fear in the wielder that its blade would be turned against him. The temporary alliances were relationships of mutual trust that they would not be betrayed.

If a magician had contact with the military, then it was to acquire and maintain that trust; less with the aim of constructing that relationship than to solidify it. Such thinking was, for someone who understood the position of magicians, common sense.

However, Nakura did not nod agreement with his master's words.

"The commander in chief, Major General Saeki, established the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion with the aim of having a magic-equipped military force independent from the Ten Master Clans. The commanding officer, Major Kazama, was known as a person who disapproved of the Ten Master Clans when commander-in-chief Kudou retired from military service. However heretical the Yotsuba Clan is, I think that it would be difficult to win over his battalion."

Koichi raised his brows at Nakura's words.

"...That's the first I've heard of this."

"That's because the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion did not touch the Saegusa Clan's interests."

The question of 'so why do you know about this' was not drawn out of Koichi's mouth.

'For the sake of this investigation' was the only excuse he would receive. Besides, even though the man had served him for a long time, Koichi did not think of Nakura as a member of the Saegusa. And that was surely the same for that man as well.

"...So then, why do the Yotsuba remain in contact with the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion?"

His question was on a different matter. And immediately after he asked it, Koichi had an answer from himself.

"Perhaps it is as Danna-sama thinks."

Nakura did not have any mind reading skills. Koichi didn't have any such skill either. Nevertheless, without making certain, Nakura was confident that Koichi had made the same conjecture he himself had.

Koichi took the card released from the scanner between his index and middle fingers and lightly flicked his hand. The paper card he let fly flared with light before instantly burning up.

Before he disposed of the ashes in the wastebasket, Nakura bowed and turned his back.

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At the edge of the Saegusa mansion's extensive grounds, there was a long, narrow, rectangular, cube-shaped building. This simple but not rustic building was the Saegusa family's private shooting range.

Even if it's called the Saegusa family's, the range was actually built for Mayumi. Five years before, when Mayumi took her first trophy in a national level tournament, it had been built in commemoration of that.

Mayumi, who had been piled with mentally draining things from the morning onward, immediately after lunch came to this shooting range and

had already been at it for three hours. Determinedly, she shot targets with a long, narrow, cane-shaped specialized CAD with a handle.

Pierce.

Destroy.

Unlike using an actual gun, firing with magic did not cause a recoil that would hurt her hands, but the mental fatigue was naturally harsh.

Nevertheless, to the extremely gloomy Mayumi, this fatigue warmed her heart.

Without worrying about the pace, she earnestly fired, and before she knew it, she had depleted the stock of targets. She cast her eye at her watch and was surprised by how much time had passed; she placed her CAD on the rack and started to put everything else away. —After she started.

"Onee-chan, I'm back!"

However, when she took off her information blocking goggles, she received an embrace from behind that she was unprepared for — a change of plans was unavoidable.

"Kasumi-chan, don't cause problems for Onee-sama by jumping at her suddenly."

"Geez, Izumi, you are such a nag."

"That's because Kasumi-chan is so ill-mannered."

The problem was only a simple stumble and she was immediately released (Kasumi was torn off of Mayumi) for which she was, to be frank, grateful for.

"Kasumi-chan, Izumi-chan, welcome home."

During the twins' usual spat — that is to say playful bickering — Mayumi restored her posture and came to them.

"I'm back, Onee-sama."

The girl who politely bowed with her hands together was the younger twin, Saegusa Izumi. A feminine girl with hair in a straight bob that went to her shoulders.

The one who had embraced Mayumi was the elder of the twins, Mayumi's younger sister and Izumi's elder sister, Saegusa Kasumi. She was the opposite of Izumi, a tomboyish girl with short hair.

They were monozygotic[14] twins, but because their tastes and manners were completely opposite, ordinarily you wouldn't mistake one for the other.

"What are you practicing? It's not an actual physical bullet Movement magic. Virtual Field magic?"

"Virtual Area Expansion Penetration magic, right? Onee-sama has been practicing this magic often, lately."

However, they shared a similar sharp sensitivity toward magic. Anyone would say that Mayumi's sensitivity towards the practical was superior to her ability with theory, but the twins were the type of magician that had the same orientation as her. Their ability to discern the identity of invoked sequences might be even greater than Mayumi's own. Just now, they had perceived the magic she had used correctly from the 'bullet hole' that remained on the target.

Mayumi spoiled the twins too much because they were adorable, and the pair adored Mayumi in return. However, lately — perhaps due to their ages — she had noticed them being a little insolent.

"Nevertheless, Onee-sama has certainly been pounding away a lot."

Izumi's sharp eyes perceived the lack of remains of the targets, causing her to speak out in a slightly astonished tone.

"Then, Hirofumi-san came?"

Kasumi answered in a smirking voice.

"Onee-chan, you definitely get in a bad mood when Hirofumi-san comes."

Her unwavering expression disappeared; Mayumi had not thought anyone could see what she was trying to hide.

At any rate, these two were quite perceptive.

Or perhaps I am more easy to read than I believed, thought Mayumi, becoming a little depressed.

"I don't think Hirofumi is all that bad a person."

"He isn't a bad person, but that's all he is. Such an unreliable person is not suitable for Onee-sama."

"Izumi, your scoring is too harsh. Okay, what kind of person would be all right, how about Katsuto-kun?"

"Hey, Kasumi-chan, Juumonji-kun and I aren't particularly—"

"That's right, he's not deficient in good looks but the unfortunate point about him is that he wouldn't exactly try to understand a maiden's heart."

Why did — Mayumi sincerely thought this — Katsuto's name come up; Mayumi hurriedly tried to fix her younger sister's 'misunderstanding,' but neither Izumi nor Kasumi was listening.

"Let's see, how would I go about making the right guy for her… Anyway, I thinks it's only natural that a guy wouldn't understand a maiden's heart since we don't understand what guys are thinking."

"Kind! You're being too kind, Kasumi-chan! It's enough that a maiden understands a man's heart after they become lovers! In order to make a maiden's heart his, first the man must understand the maiden's heart."

"A maiden's heart... fine. So, what would be necessary other than good looks?"

"Love, absolutely... If there's a sudden hurdle that's too high, a fierce true love should awaken, right."

"We've been together since birth, but I didn't know you were this much of a romanticist (spelled as person with the mindset of a little girl), Izumi. I thought you were only being rigid."

"I feel like you meant something else when you said 'romanticist'... well, enough about that. Besides, I am not a romanticist, Kasumi-chan; you just don't care enough about this stuff."

"Whatever, I'm not very girlish anyway. So, after all, who is allowed to be loved by Onee-chan? Someone like Hattori-san?"

"Kasumi-chan! How do you know Hanzou-kun's name!?"

Appearing out of nowhere (actually she'd been there from the start), Mayumi was between them because she couldn't just silently listen to these words. Mayumi had absolutely no recollection of introducing Hattori to her younger sisters.

"Of course, we would know about any annoying bugs buzzing around Onee-sama"

"Izumi-chan, I don't believe it, you two haven't been spying on me, have you!? It doesn't... it's none of your business who I date or anything else!"

"Wrong, Onee-chan. Izumi and I have school, so there's no way we can go around spying on you, so there!"

(You've been using other people to do it!?)

She was only screaming in her mind, so of course it could not be heard by other people. However, perhaps the twins could hear it somehow, but Mayumi couldn't see them acting like they did from their behavior.

"Besides, Kasumi-chan and I worry about Onee-sama? In spite of Onee-sama being so beautiful, you've never had a boyfriend and you're already eighteen... You're even about to graduate high school."

"It's not that I can't, my social standing..."

She was aware that saying she just hadn't made one sounded very much like an excuse. Even worse, a fairly 'wretched' excuse or perhaps a 'pathetic' kind of excuse.

"Hey, aren't you two in the same boat; after all, you two haven't dated anyone either."

So she tried to rapidly change the subject; however, Mayumi was not aware that this was also a pretty pitiful comment. —Until her sisters' counterattack.

"So what, Izumi and I are still fifteen."

"As for love confessions, I received two today. They were politely refused. 'This experience' is not all that uncommon."

"You're rigid, Izumi. Wouldn't it be all right to try dating them for a little while."

"Kasumi-chan is too cruel. Undoubtedly, all of Kasumi-chan's boy friends don't think of Kasumi-chan as 'a mere friend'... If you keep up with that lax behavior, sooner or later something bad will happen."

Well aware of her own patheticness, Mayumi fell into a depression to the BGM of her sisters' conversation.

◊ ◊ ◊

November 4th.

At last, it was the noon break of the first day of restarted classes.

"President — I mean, Mayumi-san. You seem a little tired."

Worried looks were being directed at Mayumi, who was visiting the student council room to help deal with the follow-ups, by Azusa.

"Hmm, a bit. But I'm fine."

"Wouldn't it be better if you waited till next week..."

Today was Friday. There was lessons on Saturday as well, but third years didn't actually have to attend school, and the number of them doing self-study at home today and tomorrow was not small.

"I thought I could not endure becoming even more worn out."

"I see. So you left and came to school?"

Azusa tilted her head, staring in puzzlement at Mayumi's reply.

Well, coming to school because staying home was even more exhausting was probably something other people could not understand.

She felt explaining would be somewhat embarrassing.

Thus, Mayumi did not answer Azusa's question and yawned a small 'aah' with one hand covering her mouth.

She folded both arms on the table.

Then, rested her cheek on them.

She felt that Azusa's eyes widened when she suddenly laid down and began to doze, but Mayumi paid her no mind and began breathing as though she was soundly asleep.

References

1. ↑ The author makes a distinction between words that are spoken and words transmitted through electronics, I am trying to make the same distinction by using the square brackets
2. ↑ Matoi is Yakumo's illusion technique. The word Matoi can mean 'Clothed' or 'Enshrouded' in something.
3. ↑ The kanji for 'Shizuku' means 'teardrop'
4. ↑ 顧傑
5. ↑ 黒顧大人 - 大人 is an honorific similar to -sama in Japanese but is used for males only.
6. ↑ Part of the ears which deals with balance.
7. ↑ Respectful term of address for second eldest brother, left as is due to the awkwardness of a direct TL.
8. ↑ Swordsman famous for creating Shinkage-ryū
9. ↑ Reference to the Yamata no Orochi, or Eight-Forked Serpent
10. ↑ Kuroba (黒羽) - black feather
11. ↑ indicates electronic communication
12. ↑ Polite form of address for the male head of a household
13. ↑ in Japanese myths, raccoons can make evil plans with a poker face
14. ↑ twins from a single egg

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